

PLUCK AND LUCK

COMPLETE STORIES OF ADVENTURE.

Issued Weekly—By Subscription \$2.50 per year Entered as Second Class Matter at the New York Post Office, November 7, 1898, by Frank Toussy.

No. 231.

NEW YORK, NOVEMBER 5, 1902.

Price 5 Cents.

JACK WRIGHT AND HIS ELECTRIC AIR SCHOONER;

OR, THE MYSTERY OF A
MAGIC MINE.
By NO NAME.



The crater dwellers, who had pursued them down the rocks, were guided to their location by their shouts, and while the Sky Rocket was rushing through the air to their rescue the savages were climbing up the rocks from the plateau below, with the intention of attacking them.

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JACK WRIGHT AND HIS ELECTRIC AIR SCHOONER

OR,

The Mystery of a Magic Mine.

By "NONAME."

CHAPTER I.

THE ESCAPED LIONS.

The fisher-village of Wrightstown, nestling at the head of a small but pretty bay on the Atlantic sea coast, was named after a celebrated inventor of submarine boats known as Bill Wright.

He was a widower, with one child, a bright, manly boy named Jack, who had inherited his father's talent for inventing, and when the old gentleman died the boy became famous as the originator of many strange marvels for navigating land, sky and sea.

The boy amassed a large fortune from his various trips and lived in an elegant mansion with two friends in the suburbs of the village, the foot of his garden being covered with a great workshop in which he conducted his inventions.

One of Jack's friends was an old sailor named Tim Topstay, who had been a messmate of the boy's father in the navy, and the other was a fat Dutch boy called Fritz Schneider, whom Jack picked up in the village one day.

On a bright June day the young inventor left his cozy library at the side of the house with the intention of going out to the workshop, in which stood an electric air-schooner which he had recently completed, when the martial strains of a brass band in the street reached his ears.

He paused, glanced around, and, turning, he strode along the flagged path leading to the front of the house.

A large circus had come to Wrightstown, the big white tent of which had been pitched in the public square in front of Jack's house, and the music he now heard came from a brass band leading a procession of the actors, menagerie and chariots that was going through the village.

The boy was then an athletic fellow, clad in a very handsome suit, derby covering his dark hair, black eyebrows shading his jet-colored eyes and his rather sharp features were adorned by the faint down of a slight moustache.

He was quick, smart, courageous and good-hearted, well educated and as strong as a man, although not yet twenty years old.

When he reached the front of the house he saw the street lined on both sides with crowds of interested people, who were eagerly scanning the gaudy procession as it moved along.

Boys and girls were shouting to each other, men and women were loudly talking about the animals in the cages, and every one was cheering the prancing horses, gilded wagons, marching beasts and spangled actors, and a fever of intense excitement thrilled the crowd.

Jack paused at the gate and viewed the parade over the heads of the people, for his grounds were terraced and stood a few feet above the street.

He had hardly taken up his position there when Tim Topstay came out of the house and joined him.

The sailor was past the prime of life, clad in a mariner's costume, and had a wooden leg, a glass eye, and his rugged face was framed in a sandy beard, while in his mouth was a huge chew of navy plug.

He was a splendid navigator, a terrible liar, of a courageous and adventurous spirit, and was very much devoted to Jack.

"Shiver me, lad!" he exclaimed, as he hobbled up to the boy, with a broad grin on his face, "but this 'ere's as fine a show as a lubber'd wish ter sight. An' they tacks along as smooth as a brig in a five-knot breeze!"

"Every one has turned out to see the procession," replied Jack, as his gaze roved over the cheering multitude. "A circus is an unusual sight in this town, Tim, and they'll have a crowded tent."

"Whar's Fritz?" queried the sailor, presently.

"Back in the workshop. He was getting the Sky Rocket, my new air-schooner, ready for our trial trip this afternoon."

At this juncture a huge cage on wheels went rolling by.

containing a pair of enormous African lions, that were glaring ferociously at the spectators, and roaring like muttering thunder.

Every one shuddered with dread as they glanced at the frightful, untamed beasts, for it was very evident that the crowd excited them.

"What beauties!" exclaimed the boy, pointing at them. "I'd give a good deal to meet them in the jungle with a good rifle in my hands."

"Ay, now, for my part, I'd sooner be up a tree," dryly replied Tim, giving a hitch at his baggy pants. "But mebbe ye may soon have yer wish, if we goes on ther trip as yer wuz a-plannin' ter take in ther new air-schooner to ther island o' Ceylon."

"There are no lions there," replied Jack. "But there are a great many beasts equally as dangerous, and I expect to enjoy considerable sport at hunting them if our voyage there through the air is successful."

"It is decided as we're ter go next week then, lad?"

"Without fail, as everything is in readiness for a start."

"That settles it, then, my hearty, for—helloat—"

The old sailor's remarks suddenly ended in a startled exclamation, for at that moment a terrible shout of dismay from the people in the street went up to the sky.

It was followed by a fearful crash and a mighty roar.

"The lions have broken loose!" shrieked a woman among the spectators.

Jack gave a violent start and glanced up the street at the lions' cage, when a thrill of horror passed over him upon observing that the beasts in question were springing out of their wagons.

By some means the stupid fellows who had charge of the cage had failed to spring the lock entirely in the door, and the jolting of the wagons causing it to slip back the iron-barred door had opened.

No sooner did the lions observe this, when the male made a leap for the ground, followed by its mate, and the next instant the two mighty beasts were free.

The frightened crowd was transfixed for an instant.

Then the spell broke.

They made a mad rush backward, falling over each other, tramping down the weak, screaming, yelling, swearing, struggling and fighting to get away, and in a moment a scene of the most intense excitement began.

The procession was stopped, keepers rushed toward the brutes with ropes and red-hot irons to recapture them, and the lions, becoming more excited, sprang away in opposite directions.

Overwhelmed with terror, the crowd parted before the female, and she sprang over a fence and fled through a deserted street toward the woods that lined one side of Wrightstown Bay, followed by her keepers.

With bristling mane and glowing eyes the other beast gave a bound through the air and landed squarely in the middle of a dense crowd.

Men shouted and women screamed, the crowd parted and the next instant the people were running for dear life.

A little, curly-headed boy in knickerbockers was standing directly in the lion's way, shrieking for his mother, and he lay there pale and inanimate, the lion standing over him, its head raised, its tail lashing its flanks and one of its paws on the child's bosom.

In a moment every one managed to get away from around the beast, leaving the child to his fate!

Fairly frenzied with excitement now, the lion glared down at its little victim, its gaping jaws wide open, exposing its formidable white teeth, while roar after roar pealed from its drawling mouth.

When the fleeing spectators observed the child's peril, a

groan of anguish pealed from every lip, for it seemed as if nothing could save the child from destruction.

With bulging eyes and bated breath they watched the tragic scene, and already pictured the beast tearing the child to pieces.

Then an awful stillness overcame them.

Not a man among the multitude had courage enough to do anything to help the imperiled little fellow, and every woman looking on breathed a silent prayer for his salvation.

"Tim!" hoarsely cried the young inventor. "See! In one moment more that monster will rip him to fragments!"

"Heaven help ther leetle chap!" gasped the old sailor, in awed tones.

"This is horrible—horrible!"

"Wot's ter be did, lad?"

"I can't stand by and see him killed!"

"No! no! Nor I!"

"I've got no weapon but this knife, yet——"

"Don't risk it then, lad!" implored Tim.

It was only a long-bladed clasp-knife the boy held, yet Jack was so worked up he did not hesitate over the appalling risk he ran.

"If I don't make an effort the child will die!" he gasped, starting forward.

"Come back!" screamed Tim, trying to detain him.

But tearing himself free the young inventor rushed out the gate, and with the open knife clutched point downward in his hand, he dashed out into the middle of the street.

A shout went up from the spectators.

"Go back!" frantically cried every one.

Jack paid no heed to their warning, however.

With his nerves steeled he rushed straight for the lion, and as the ugly-eyed beast saw him coming it raised its head, glared at him a moment and roared again and again.

Its attention was now turned from its unfortunate little victim.

On went the brave boy until he stood within five paces of the enraged brute, and then he came to a pause.

His unflinching eyes met those of the lion with an unwavering stare, and he took a firmer grip on his knife, for he knew that a battle of life or death was impending.

For an instant the boy and the beast stood facing each other in deathly silence, and then, gathering itself together, the lion uttered a roar and made a spring for Jack.

CHAPTER II.

THE WONDERFUL AIR-SCHOONER.

The keen eyes of the young inventor were intently fixed upon the king of beasts, and no sooner did he see it spring, when he bounded aside, and swift as the lion's movements were, he was quicker.

It missed the boy and struck the ground on the spot Jack left, just grazing the young inventor's body.

As quick as a flash Jack struck at the monster with his knife, the blade sinking up to the handle in the lion's throat.

From its gaping mouth there emanated a frightful roar, and it flew back a few paces, scratching up the dirt in showers, wheeled around and rising on its haunches, began to paw at its head.

Low, whining cries escaped it, and the fierce look in its eyes intensified; its breath came and went in gasps and it rushed at Jack again with irresistible fury, struck the boy and knocked him over.

Down he went, rolling over and over, and the lion was crouching over him in one moment more, snarling and baring

its fangs, when the boy got upon his elbow and stabbed it in the neck again.

Torrents of blood gushed from the animal's wounds and it recoiled, raised one of its mighty paws and aiming a blow at Jack, its claws caught him on the breast, tore his coat, vest and shirt to shreds, lacerated his skin and knocked him over again.

Before the boy could recover from the blow, the beast sprang upon him and was stooping to tear him to pieces, when a dozen revolvers rang out from among the horrified spectators.

At least half the bullets fired struck the beast and toppled it over.

It was riddled with bullets and killed in an instant, its great, tawny carcass falling heavily across Jack's legs.

Pinioned down by its weight, the boy was unable to move until the crowd rushed up, surrounding him and removed the monster.

By this time the mother of the little boy had found her child, snatched him up in her arms and revived him with her tears and kisses.

A hundred anxious questions rained in upon Jack as he lightly sprang to his feet and glanced down at the defunct lion, but he put on a cheerful laugh and said, carelessly:

"Oh, I'm all right! He only gave me a scratch."

"But you are bleeding!" said a man, anxiously.

"I'll soon stop that; but how about the little fellow?"

"He's safe, lad," said Tim, stumping up just then, with an anxious look.

As the crowd was getting denser, Jack and Tim returned to the yard.

"Hurrah for Jack Wright!" yelled one of the people.

"Hurrah! hurrah! hurrah!" cheered every one with enthusiasm.

With thousands of praises for his gallantry ringing in his ears, the boy smiled, and bowing to the people, he retreated into the house, followed by old Tim, who wanted to attend to his injuries.

"Well, old fellow, I saved the little boy anyway, didn't I?" asked the young inventor, as he divested himself of his torn clothes.

"Lord save yer, lad, I never seed sich courage afore," said Tim, as he sponged the lacerations on Jack's bosom and banded him up.

"I ran a great risk, but couldn't stand seeing that child killed," the boy answered, as he put on another suit of clothes.

"It wuz a dangerous thing ter do," solemnly said Tim, "an' makes me recollect a leetle scrape I once got inter when I wuz in ther navy aboard o' ther frigate Wabash——"

"Hold on, Tim, no yarns now, if you please," interposed Jack.

"Ay, now, but this one's a corker," persisted Tim. "It happened this way. One night I wuz on watch, an' all my mates fell asleep, when wot should climb up ther side an' board us but a big octopus. Thar I wuz all alone, cornered in the bows, wi' no weaping, an' ther cuss a-comin' fer me. Out shot two o' his long, squirmen' arms wi' suckers on ther ends, an' I made a desperate grab an' ketched 'em. Quicker'n a wink, I tied 'em in a knot. Two more came fer me, an' again I made fast to 'em an' tied them in a knot. I thought as my days wuz numbered, sir, but blast my timbers, if I didn't grab every feeler that 'ere lubber hove towards me, and by ther time I got through with him, I tied him all up in so many knots he couldn't budge a inch! Then I werry quietly got a grip on ther blasted swab an' dragged him overboard, an' a shark came along, an' quick's lightnin', gobbled him down! Now wot d'yer think o' that?"

And with a beaming look in his eye, Tim turned around

to hear Jack applaud his yarn, when he saw that he was all alone.

The boy had quietly left the room when Tim began his story while looking out the window, and Tim had been talking away to himself.

He gave a grunt of supreme disgust, and grumbling at the boy, went out.

Jack had left the house, and was making his way toward the workshop in the garden, when he heard Fritz playing an accompaniment on a wheezy old accordion, and singing in gruff, boisterous tones:

"I shust dit landt from de oldt coontry, to make me some peesness here,

I oben a lager-beer saloon, mine reasons vhas very glear;
Der poys dey dit me some foolishness, but dot makes me nodings oudt,

Dey hook mine free lunch, mine gizzard punch, und eat me mine sauerkraut.

"Ach! I'm Fritzzy, der chay from Shermany,

I liefs on bologna und kase.

I'm fat und gay—don't gief dot away—

I stob all der glocks mit mine face.

"I hat a smash mit a bimpily nose, her eyes vhas squinted like fun,

Her breat' vhas vorser as anydings, her feet so bick she can'd run;

I married me dot Katarina, und now mine heart vhas det proke,

She ran away mit anudder chay, but I don't vhas see der choke——"

At this point the song was suddenly cut short by a terrific howl in the voice of a monkey, followed by the grating scream of a parrot.

The Dutch boy joined in with a stormy tirade of abuse at Bismarck, the parrot, which was his own pet, and Whiskers, the little red, howling monkey, which belonged to the old sailor.

Tim and Fritz had once captured their respective pets during a trip to Africa.

Jack opened the door of his workshop and passed into a huge room, the movable ceiling of which had been opened so that nothing but the clear blue sky was to be seen above.

In the middle of the room stood the boy's latest invention, an air-ship, looking like a schooner, of somewhat peculiar shape.

Beside the Sky Rocket, as it was called, stood a little fat Dutch boy, clad in a costume which he might have worn in his native land.

He had an enormous stomach, a round, fat face, watery blue eyes and flaxen hair, and in his mouth he held a pipe.

Fritz was an excitable individual, a good player of the accordion, an expert electrician and was ever ready for a fight or adventure.

"Shiminey Christmas!" he roared, just as Jack entered, and he made an elephantine jump for the monkey and parrot, who were fighting upon the floor with the most intense fury. "Go for him, Bismarck! Pull all der vool cudt ouf his het! Le' go ouf dot barrot's dail, Vhitskers! Who's der medder mit you alretty? Ach, Gott, if I got me aholt of you vonct, I proke me your neck!"

He made a dive for the fighters, but before he could catch them they flew aboard of the schooner and disappeared from view.

"Helloa there, Fritz!" exclaimed Jack, laughing at his friend, who was shaking his pudgy fist at the air-ship and

dancing up and down in his rage. "What's the matter here now?"

The Dutch boy calmed down and glanced around at the young inventor.

"Donner vetter! Don'd yer vhas seen vot's der metter?" he growled. "Dot pird und dot animals vhas grazzy. I nef-fer seen two dings vot hates each odder worser as dem. Dem vhas all der dime fightin' deirsellufs, und durn me mine prain, also. Der first chances I got, I gill dot mongey."

"Well, let the matter drop. Is the Sky Rocket already for use?"

"Sure. I make all der electric gonnections, und now ve got oursellufs nodings to do but to go on poard, und start her off."

"Water and provisions aboard yet?"

"No. But eferyding else is."

"This afternoon, then, we must give her a trial trip. Come on board and let us examine her thoroughly to see if any detail has been omitted."

The Dutch boy nodded, and they both ascended an accommodation ladder at the side of the Sky Rocket and went aboard of her.

She was a schooner-rigged craft, about one hundred feet long, with a square sail forward and a leg-of-mutton sail aft, for going before the wind, while the top of each mast was surmounted by huge wheels, or helices, for lifting the air-ship up from the ground or sea.

The hull was made of aluminum; there was a round pilot turret forward, a square deck-house amidships, and a companionway aft; the railed decks projected considerably, and depending from each side were seven small helices, to aid the ones at the tops of the masts in lifting the boat upwards.

From the ends of the side decks there were driving screws on each side; at the stern projected an enormous driving-wheel, and at the bow was an air rudder, as such vessels steer best from the bow, against the wind.

She was also adapted to sailing in the water, for there was a stern rudder and propeller for use in the sea, and her entire motive power came from a large number of electrical accumulator jars stored in the hold, of almost unlimited capacity.

By an ingenious mechanical arrangement of Jack's invention, the electric current was made to operate the machinery controlling the screws and helices, and as she was built after the most approved method for aerial navigation, and of a model Jack had once successfully tested, the boy had every reason to believe his invention would be a success.

The Sky Rocket was furnished magnificently inside; there was a powerful ram and search-light in the bow, and her stores consisted of every necessity for an air trip, besides arms, ammunition, and various implements of different kinds.

She was a bullet-proof vessel, and stood on flanges, which were made to fly out of the hull to rest her upon the land.

Jack and Fritz spent an hour looking her over, and at the expiration of that time returned to the deck, when they saw the door fly open and Tim rushed into the shop.

The old sailor had a startled look upon his face.

"Jack!" he yelled; "whar are ye? Somethin' dreadful has happened, lad! Jack, ahoy! Jack, ahoy!"

CHAPTER III.

CHASED THROUGH THE CLOUDS.

A look of anxiety swept over Jack's face, and he ran to the railing and cried:

"I'm up here, Tim; what's the matter?"

"Ah! There yer are, hey! Sich goin's on?" gasped Tim, looking up with his good eye.

He hastily mounted the ladder and joined his friends on the deck.

"Sherusalem!" ejaculated Fritz. "Haf yer got a bain?"

"Pain? No!" growled Tim. "But thar's ther werry deuce a-goin' on."

"Why don't you explain yourself!" impatiently asked Jack.

"Ay, now, an' so I will, if ye gimme time! It's rank murder, my lad."

"Murder?" repeated Jack, in startled tones.

"Who vhas got killed?" demanded Fritz, hastily.

"Yer know ther circus wuz ter have a balloon ascension?"

"Yes—yes!"

"Waal, I wuz thar jist now, an' ther aeronaut went up."

"Well, where does the crime come in?"

"Jist as ther balloon arose, a feller wot stood in ther crowd sprung fer ther bastick an' got in, when ther aeronaut gave a yell an' struck him. They clinched, an' ther stranger pulled out a knife an' stabbed the aeronaut. He fell, an' ther raskal heaved out several sandbags, when up shot ther balloon, an' away she sailed afore ther wind. 'A thousan' dollars reward fer ther capture o' that 'ere scoundrel,' ses ther circus owners. 'I takes yer up,' ses I. An' away I tacks fer here ter tell yer ter start the Sky Rocket after ther balloon an' win that money."

Jack gave a start.

Here was an opportunity to test his air-schooner.

"I'll do it!" said he.

"Bully fer you!" exclaimed Fritz, delightedly.

"Everything is ready," said the boy. "We may as well go now as later on. Come ahead, boys, and we'll start the Sky Rocket!"

"Keel haul me, now, but I reckoned ye would," chuckled Tim. "Besides that, I ain't sartin as ther lubber killed ther aeronaut. Mebbe he's only wounded an' we may save ther poor swab from a horrible fate."

"Fritz!" said the boy.

"Yah! Vot iss?"

"Go down in the battery-room and watch the jars and wires."

The Dutch boy nodded and ran into the 'midship deck-house.

"Tim!" continued Jack.

"Ay, ay, lad!" responded the old sailor.

"Cast off the hawsers and stand watch aft!"

"I'll have her ready ter le' go in one minute."

"Then I'll go into the pilot-house and start her."

Away popped the ancient mariner, and he rapidly cast loose the lines, while Jack passed into the turret to start the Sky Rocket.

It was a large circular room, the windows having sliding shutters, the floor carpeted, the walls hung with gauges, indicators and various kinds of instruments, a wheel and compass binnacle rising from the floor, and a lever-table standing beside it, by which the vessel was controlled.

By turning any of these levers the boat could be made to fly up, go ahead, back, descend, or navigate on the water, while the incandescent lamps, search-light and other things controlled by electricity, were operated by special levers on the board.

Jack grasped the wheel and presently heard Tim shout:

"All right! Let her go! Everything's free!"

The boy turned one of the levers, putting the helix machinery into communication with the electrical batteries, and the wheels spun around at the top of the masts and at the sides of the decks.

A whistling sound arose, and the Sky Rocket began to ascend slowly from the floor and rise toward the opened roof.

Jack glanced at one of the registers.

There was not quite enough battery on and he turned the lever further.

Under this additional power the schooner's ascent became more rapid, and with a swift, stately motion she arose from the building, shot up above it, and got above the house-tops.

Every one in the streets now saw her, and a tremendous cheer pealed from every throat when Jack's new invention arose.

Tim ran up the stars and stripes on the flag pole aft, and as the proud banner of freedom fluttered out on the still wind, the cheers increased.

With buzzing wheels and throbbing machinery, the Sky Rocket mounted higher and higher into the clear, brisk air, her helices lifting her with ease at half power, their even distribution keeping the boat on a level keel.

Jack glanced at the indicators.

It registered a height of five hundred feet.

He then observed by the third indicator that the wind was from the northwest, and, at that altitude, was blowing at the rate of forty miles an hour.

Sweeping a glance around, the boy discerned a large dark object floating away to the eastward in the sky, several miles away and about two thousand feet higher up than the Sky Rocket floated.

It was the balloon he was in pursuit of.

He permitted the schooner to mount to the same altitude, and the air grew cold and uncomfortable; then he gradually lessened the speed of the helices until they revolved just swiftly enough to hold the vessel at its present height without dropping or ascending any.

She remained stationary, hovering over the village.

From his position within the turret Jack could see the landscape below.

Wrightstown looked very small at that height, and adjoining settlements were mere specks; the intervening ground was made up of lights and shadows; rivers took the appearance of serpentine silvery threads, and the adjacent ocean assumed a dark, flat, forbidding look.

There were a few misty clouds drifting by below them.

The peculiar sensation from their lofty position made the crew of the schooner deathly sick for a while; but this feeling soon wore away, and they became accustomed to the odd feeling.

Jack saw that the balloon was caught in a strong current of wind, and was flying along at a tremendous velocity over the sea.

Just then Fritz came in and announced everything all right.

"We will have a long chase after that balloon," said Jack.

"Yah! I tink so neider," admitted the Dutch boy, with a nod.

"She must have about ten miles the start of us."

"Und dot vhas a strong vind she floats herselluf in, don'd id?"

"Very. She is going straight out to sea—do you observe, Fritz?"

"If she vhas pust ub'alretty und dumble down, dot veller vill dife down into der vater. You tink dot ve vhas ower-took him puddy soon?"

"That depends entirely upoh circumstances," replied the boy. "Now look there. A storm cloud has swept between the balloon and this craft. I don't dare go through it, with those streaks of lightning flashing out of it. I'll drop her under it and go ahead."

He slackened the helices still more and the Sky Rocket sank down some.

Then he turned another lever, which put the driving-wheels in motion, and as soon as they spun, the boat shot ahead.

Off she went as straight as an arrow through the air in hot pursuit of the fugitive balloon, and passed out over the sea.

Huge ships now looked like atoms below.

The coldness made Jack and Fritz shiver.

Just then Tim came thumping in, attired in a fur overcoat, and handed the two boys their sealskin coats, hats and gloves.

A lively conversation went on among them about the ability of the air-schooner to perform her functions, and they soon left the land far astern and went sweeping over the broad Atlantic.

The sun was going down fast now.

When the Sky Rocket reached the stormy clouds, a deluge of rain came down on her, and they heard the crash of thunder and observed vivid tongues of lightning flying through the air.

The wind too was all cut up by cross-currents that made the Sky Rocket whirl and jerk with an unsteady motion.

It filled our friends with anxiety, for the boat was strained hard.

She soon passed from under the storm center, however, and swiftly proceeded after the fugitive balloon.

Once past the dark, turbid clouds, the silken bag reappeared.

They did not seem to have gained much on it, although the indicator showed Jack that the air-schooner was flying along at the rate of thirty miles an hour.

He raised her to the level of the balloon again.

As soon as this was done they had the wind astern.

"Get up the sails, boys," said the young inventor. "They will help us along faster. The machinery can do it, but I don't want to strain it in the beginning."

"Ay, now, that's wot I call sensible," said Tim. "It'll make a feller almost feel as if he wuz on the sea agin."

He hurried out on deck with Fritz.

They shook the canvas loose, and, steadying the braces, the wind caught the white sails and swept them along faster by ten miles an hour.

Both Tim and Fritz remained out on deck to watch the sails, and Jack kept a keen glance on the balloon.

"We are gaining now!" he exclaimed.

He told the truth.

The air-schooner rapidly bore down on the balloon.

The space between them swiftly narrowed, and they soon saw that there was but one man visible in the swaying wickerwork car.

He stood clutching the ropes and watched them intently, a look of astonishment at the strange air-schooner upon his face.

Faster flew the Sky Rocket, until at last she was within fifty feet of the big balloon, when Tim and Fritz hauled down the sails, and Jack drove the schooner up to the silken globe.

At that moment they saw the recumbent figure of the stabbed balloonist lying in the bottom of the basket.

CHAPTER IV.

A SERIOUS MISHAP.

The man standing in the car of the balloon was a dark-featured fellow of about fifty, looking somewhat like a mulatto, attired in rough, tattered clothing, an old derby and a red flannel shirt.

He had his jet-black eyes fixed upon the air-schooner intently, a tigerish expression upon his angular features, that were half hidden by a curly beard.

It was evident that he was a foreigner, and Jack imagined he might be a Hindoo, as he had been in India and seen that race before.

But the boy did not waste much time speculating, for as soon as the air-schooner was close to the balloon, he shouted to Fritz, who had run out:

"Hey, catch the balloon-car with a grapnel, Fritz!"

"Dot vhas all righd," replied the Dutch boy, hastening to comply.

As he stood ready to fling the grapnel over into the wicker basket, the dark fellow drew a huge navy revolver from a belt under his coat, and aiming it at the boy, he shouted, in a heavy bass voice:

"Stop! Don't try, or I fire!"

"Vot!" roared Fritz, recoiling in surprise.

"I don't want capture. You stand back!"

"Don'd yer vhas wanted us ter safe yer alretty?"

"No, I prefer to sail away in this balloon."

"But vout apoud dot veller vot yer stab?"

"He is mortally wounded. I shall keep him."

Fritz was at a loss how to act, and turned around, when he saw Jack exchange places with Tim, and leaving the old sailor to manage the air-schooner, the boy came up forward, having heard all that was said.

The Sky Rocket had been graded to the speed of the balloon, and went along within two yards of the wicker car and the flukes caught fast.

A growl of anger escaped the balloonist.

He now directed his pistol at Jack, and roared:

"Didn't you hear what I said?"

Jack began to haul in on the wire line.

"Yes, I heard you," coolly replied the boy, "but I've started out to capture you as there's a thousand dollars offered for it, and I'm looking for the money."

"If you don't let me go, I'll kill you!" hissed the man, savagely.

"Perhaps you may try, but you won't succeed quite so easily as you did with the poor fellow who now lies in that basket."

"He was an enemy of mine whom I swore to destroy!"

"Well, you'll suffer the penalty of your crime now!"

As Jack said this he fastened the line to the railing, for the balloon had been drawn close up to the Sky Rocket and the next moment he sprang into the basket.

The man raised his pistol to fire at the boy when Jack dealt him a blow between the eyes with his clenched fist and knocked him over.

Before the rascal could recover from the blow, Jack wrenched the pistol from his hand and flung it overboard.

He got out of the car to the deck of the air-schooner, and pulled the man out with him, when Fritz rushed up with a piece of rope and bound the fellow hand and foot.

While they were so engaged the balloon broke away from the grapnel, and relieved of the dark fellow's weight, it shot up higher into the air, was caught by a swift current of wind, and away it went careening so swiftly that the schooner was soon left far behind.

It plunged into a dense mass of clouds and disappeared.

"Gone!" exclaimed Jack, in dismay. "Good heavens, and the man stabbed by this scoundrel is still in the balloon—alive!"

"Vot's ter 'be done?" blankly asked Fritz. "Ve vhas outd of sight of landt."

"Follow it, Tim!" vehemently replied Jack. "I won't go back now till I capture that balloon! Fritz, drag this beast down into the store-room in the hold and lock him up there. We will bring him back to land if we fail to capture the balloon, and prosecute him!"

The Dutch boy seized the fellow, pulled him over the deck to the companionway aft, and slid down the stairs.

Jack glanced around.

Land was nowhere in sight.

The sun had sunk, and night fell on the earth.

Returning to the turret beside Tim, the young inventor found the old fellow with a distressed look upon his face.

"What is the matter, Tim?" he asked, in some alarm.

"Gol durn it, I can't work this rudder wheel!" exclaimed the old fellow.

"Has anything happened to it?"

"Ay, now—one o' ther lines is jammed, somehow, a-hold-in' ther rudder stiddy ahead, an' I can't move it one way or the other."

"That's bad! Let me try!"

Jack grasped the wheel, and made an attempt to turn it, but it held as firm as a rock in the position it was then placed in.

A serious look swept over the boy's face.

"I can't do it!" he exclaimed.

"Then how in thunder are we-a-goin' ter turn her back ter port?" blankly asked Tim, as a grave expression settled in his solitary eye.

"It must be fixed," said Jack. "But it will take several hours to open the boxes in which the rudder lines run."

"Better lower ther craft below ther clouds, then," said Tim, cautiously. "'cause we might foul a storm bank an' git wrecked."

"That's a good suggestion. I'll follow it," replied Jack.

He reversed one of the levers, and the helices moving slower, the schooner descended down to within five hundred feet of the sea, on which the moon now shone.

Nothing was seen of the balloon but a tiny dark speck high above them in the far distance, and watching it with a glass, Jack saw that it was caught in a heavy current of air which was driving it rapidly away to the eastward.

As the rudder was stuck in a position that kept the Sky Rocket in pursuit of the fugitive balloon, the boy did not stop the driving wheels, but let the schooner fly ahead at her present altitude.

With not a sail in sight on the rolling sea beneath, Jack left the piloting turret, and crossing to the wire deck-house he passed inside, and pressing an electric button in the wall, he started the lamps.

Their silvery light showed that this deck-house was fitted up as an arsenal, for there were racks all over, upon which were hung various kinds of weapons, chairs and sofas were scattered around for lounging, and a flight of stairs at the end led down into a very handsome saloon below.

Adjoining this apartment there was a well-appointed kitchen and pantry, and forward of it a commodious sleeping apartment.

A second flight of stairs led down into the hold, into which Jack descended, and turning on more lights, he exposed to view a large, peculiar-looking electrical engine, in back of which were shelved a large number of batteries in rubber jars, joined in series by numerous insulated wires.

Every one of these wires were bunched and ran through a tube up to the switch-board in the pilot-house, while the shafts, wheels, and endless chain belts were connected with the working parts.

Two metal boxes or pipes, divided in two sections, ran down from the pilot-house, and curved along the ceiling up forward, where they ended in two holes terminating at the forward air-rudder.

It was necessary to open these boxes in order to lay bare the rudder lines, and this he proceeded to do.

As Jack predicted it occupied several hours to unbolt them, and he then found that a kink had formed in one of the lines.

He had to unfasten the line to undo it, but as soon as this

was done the trouble was rectified and he replaced the line boxes.

To his surprise he found that it was nine o'clock before he finished, and extinguishing the lights he called up a speaking tube to Tim, apprising him that the 'trouble was remedied.

Jack then ascended to the deck, when to his surprise he heard a yell in Tim's voice in the pilot-house.

The next instant it was followed by a terrific bang, the crash of glass breaking, and then the noise of a violent scuffle.

"Help! Help!" roared the old sailor.

The ship now began to fly off in the most eccentric manner, that clearly showed that the rudder was ungoverned.

With a look of alarm upon his face, Jack rushed up to the turret, and peering in he was startled to see Tim struggling on the floor with their prisoner, who had evidently escaped from his confinement.

And worse than all, the boy observed that the compass and binnacles had been smashed to pieces with the stock of a rifle which lay on the floor.

"Great heavens!" groaned the boy in dismay, "without the compass we now have no means of finding our way to Wrightstown!"

He rushed into the pilot-house and sprang upon the dark fellow, just as he was making an effort to beat Tim's brains out on the floor by clutching him by the ears and slamming his head up and down.

The next moment a terrific struggle began between them, the prisoner fighting with a savage's ferocity that was appalling.

Struggling all around the turret floor, first one and then the other gained the advantage.

Attracted by the noises of the struggle, Fritz came rushing up forward and dashed into the pilot-house, where, with one glance, he took in the scene of strife.

CHAPTER V.

STORY OF THE MAGIC MINE.

"Donner und blitzen! Who's der madder here vonct?" roared Fritz.

And the next moment he lent his assistance to Jack and Tim, and after a scuffle the three managed to secure the rampant prisoner again.

He lay glaring at them and panting hard from his terrific exertions.

Tim arose and grasping the wheels he steadied the Sky Rocket and sent her along on a straight line over the sea.

"Keel haul me, if we ain't done fer now," he panted. "Ther compass is shivered ter pieces, an' thar ain't no way fer us ter guide ourselves."

"How did the rogue get free?" asked Jack, breathlessly, as he got up.

"You didn't tie me tight enough that time," growled the man, with a diabolical look upon his face. "I'll get free again, too, as sure as my name is Banra Medima! I had no trouble to break your door down!"

"How ve vhas got back home now?" asked Fritz, in disgust. "Ve don't vhas got somedings to ead or trink on board of dot flyin' shibs, und no vun at Wrightstown know not become of us alretty?"

Jack glanced at the distance-register and exclaimed:

"Why, we have been travelling six hours now, straight out to sea and making at least forty miles an hour. We are nearly two hundred and fifty miles from Wrightstown!"

Every one looked surprised at this intelligence.

"Dere don't vhas some signs ouf dot balloon neider," said Fritz.

"I reckon as we'll have ter give it up now," growled Tim.

"There is no way to find it without a compass," said Jack, "and as we are now completely lost, we had better keep on as we are going until we sight a ship of some kind and procure a compass."

The rest agreed to this plan, and Jack then turned to Banda Medima.

"What was the cause of your enmity to Donald Howell?" he asked, curiously.

A dark, sinister look swept over the prisoner's face, and he replied:

"I am a Veddah of Ceylon, as you may have observed, and having been educated among the British soldiery for whom I worked, I know a thing or two more than my countrymen, who are an ignorant, barbaric race."

"From Ceylon, eh?" said Jack, with considerable interest, for he and his two friends had planned to pay a trip to that island in the Sky Rocket.

"Exactly," assented the man. "It was there I first met Donald Howell. He was a rascal, for he robbed me of the secret of a magic mine."

"I do not understand you," said Jack, his interest deepening.

"Let me make my meaning clearer then. He was an adventurer, who had drifted to Ceylon and joined an English nobleman who had gone there to hunt. I had been hired to act as guide for him, and Howell was the baronet's secretary, for he purposed to write a book of his adventures. We made our way into the interior, and during a deer-stalking in the mountains we became separated. Night overtook me, and I crept into a cave and fell asleep there. When I awakened, to my amazement I discovered that I had been transported far into the interior of the mountain, and then laid within a vast chamber, which might have been hollowed by the eruption of a volcano. The place was littered with immense precious stones worth a fabulous fortune, and although there was not a person to be seen, I saw every evidence around me of the cavern being inhabited. Voices reached my ears on every side, but look where I would I saw no one. The day passed by, and sounds of revelry came to me, but no one appeared. I could see no way to escape, and felt the pangs of hunger. It made me desperate to leave my living tomb. Dense darkness soon filled the cavern. I could not see anything. Presently a most mournful dirge arose. It swelled into a terrific shriek and gradually turned into a deafening roar. To my horror I observed sparks of fire snap into the cavern through the crevices in the walls. They grew in size to great jets, and then became seething tongues, spurting in with a loud, hissing noise, then retreating or dying out in a flash, leaving the place in gloom. I was terrified, I dodged the scorching fire, and shrieked aloud, and in the midst of my horror a pale, ghastly glow appeared on the walls, and outlined in weird radiance I discerned the form and figure of a girl of startling beauty. She had a ghastly look, and without uttering a word, beckoned to me. In dread of the flames I dashed toward her, and she retreated with a gliding motion through the strangely lighted vaulted passage in which she was.

"Drawn on by some strange, subtle magnetism I followed her, trembling with fear, and we emerged into a huge open space in the mountain, with highly perpendicular walls towering up all around it. It might have been the crater of an extinct volcano. The starlit sky shone overhead, and the moon arose and shed a mellow light down upon the strange scene. The bed of the great bowl gleamed with white, circular stones a yard in height with flat capstones, which lent the place a strange, grave-yard like appearance. Among these tombstones were several tall, gaunt shafts,

towering to a great height. I glanced around to question the vision-like girl, when, to my surprise, she was gone! She had vanished like thin air. I caught sight of a flitting white shadow off to the right, and turning swiftly, I saw a procession of ghostly white forms, clad in long mantles, winding among the tombstones. There came a wild shriek for help in a female voice, and then a Babel of voices in a strange language, when like magic thousands of similar ghostly white figures suddenly appeared. They seemed to spring out of the ground or from the air. Instantly they rushed pell-mell in all directions, winding about the stones, until suddenly a rumbling roar sounded, the earth shook, and up through a huge circular hole in the ground in the middle of the place spurted a column of fire into the air. Up it shot hundreds of feet toward the clouds, with a noise that was so great as to leave me partially deafened for a long time afterwards. The white figures began to melt rapidly away, until at last none were left, and a terrific heat from the column of roaring fire filled the place so that it scorched my skin, and made breathing difficult. I retreated, and seeing the stones beneath my feet blazing with a fiery luster, I picked one up. To my amazement I found it to be a magnificent ruby of great size. I put it in my pocket and ran. An opening appeared ahead of me. I plunged into it, and found myself in a passage, along which I ran until I finally emerged on the mountain side near where I had first entered the cave. Here I paused, and fairly exhausted, flung myself down upon the ground to rest.

"It soon occurred to me that a vast treasure laid buried within the precincts of that magic mountain, with its mysterious race of ghostly people, its weird scenes and sounds and its singular phenomenas of fire, and I made a careful drawing of the locality and the interior, so that I might revisit it with companions in the future. I then fell asleep. When I awakened I found Donald Howell bending over me. I told him my peculiar story, and showed him the drawing and the valuable stone, when the treacherous dog shot me, took the gem and the plan and ran away. I lost my senses. When I came to I was far from where I had fallen, having wandered away in a fit of delirium. I fell in with a roving band of Veddahs, and made an effort to find the Magic Mine, but failed. It was completely lost. I went away then, swearing a solemn oath to hunt down Donald Howell, wrest the stolen paper from him and punish him for his treachery. I got on his trail and tracked him from place to place until he eluded me by leaving Ceylon. A long hunt followed. He led me to America. Here he had joined a circus troupe and figured as an aeronaut. We met. You know the result. And I recovered the stolen paper!"

The Veddah paused.

His listeners were impressed by his strange story.

A long silence ensued, and then Jack asked:

"How can you expect us to believe such a yarn as that?"

"I expected you would doubt the story, but I don't care," replied the man.

"It sounds too unreal."

"But that is where the peculiarity of it comes in, sir."

It was plain to Jack that if Banda Medima told the truth, he was not to be so much blamed for what he had done to the aeronaut, but the boy was not disposed to pin his faith on the story until he proved its truth.

He therefore conferred with Tim and Fritz a few moments in a whisper.

"What do you think of what he said?" he asked.

"Fer my part," replied Tim, "I reckon that if his yarn is gospel it might pay us ter make a cruise ter ther magic mine, try ter git holt o' his treasure, an' divide ther prize money."

"I think so neider," added Fritz, lighting his pipe.

"That's just the plan uppermost in my mind," said Jack,

"and if we can prove it true, I may make some such an arrangement with him."

He then turned to the Veddah, who asked sourly:

"What do you intend to do with me?"

"Keep you a prisoner. You have probably murdered a man in a civilized country, and knew what the penalty of such a crime was, else you would not have taken such a desperate chance to escape in a balloon."

"Do you mean to intimate that you are going to have me hung?"

"I mean to put you in the hands of the law when we return."

"That is unfair. I was justified in seeking revenge. Besides, I did not kill the man outright as you yourself know."

"Can you prove the truth of your extraordinary story?"

"Feel in my pocket and you can see the recovered diagram yourself. The ruby must have been so'd by Howell."

Jack withdrew a rude map and showed it to his friends.

It was a diagram easy to understand.

The boy then told Tim to confine the man again, and he did so.

They kept on all night, but saw no sign of a sail, and when the next day dawned, they were hundreds of miles out to sea and very hungry.

There was not a morsel of food nor a drop of water on board, however.

It was then agreed that they descend to the sea and try their luck at fishing, to appease their aggravating hunger.

This was accordingly done, the Sky Rocket striking the water with a splash.

There were plenty of lines aboard, and as soon as Jack had stopped the helices, they got them out and began to fish.

In the sea the air-schooner rode like a ship, and when they put her stern propeller in operation and placed the wheel in communication with the small rudder aft, she rode along with the greatest ease.

They then began to troll with shiners, and within a short time caught enough blue-fish to satisfy their hunger for several days, as Fritz was a good cook and had an electric stove on which to broil the food.

CHAPTER VI.

SAVED FROM A WRECK.

It began to rain in the afternoon and the castaways set out barrels and vessels to catch the water on deck, until they collected enough to fill the reservoirs in the store-room with a supply big enough to last a long time.

They then felt safer, as a day had passed since they had tasted any water.

Another night came and went without a vessel appearing, and the log registered nearly a thousand miles' travel since they left Wrightstown.

When the following gloomy day was half spent, Tim, who stood at the wheel, gave utterance to a cry that thrilled Jack and Fritz.

"Sail ho! 'Sail ho!" was his shout.

The old sailor was on duty at the wheel, and when the others ran up from below and joined him, they descried a vessel rolling on the heavy sea, about one league away to the south-eastward.

It was evidently a wreck.

The bowsprit was gone; only the stumps of the masts remained; there were some remains of cordage broken and frayed, and the hull was battered up.

Jack seized a glass and leveled it at the wreck.

"There are some people aboard of her," he remarked, presently.

"Ay, now! I sees 'em a-signalin' to us," replied Tim.

"Vot dey vhas—Shermans?" queried Fritz.

"Sailors," said Jack. "It looks like an American craft."

He relieved Tim of the wheel and steered the Sky Rocket toward the wreck.

In a short time they heard the shouts of the half-dozen men on board of the derelict and upon a nearer approach saw that they were really sailors.

Upon drawing near, Jack heard one of them yell:

"Ship ahop! Ship ahoy?"

"Ahoy!" cried Jack.

"Save us from this wreck."

"Ay—stand by to make a hawser fast."

"We are ready."

"Have you any provisions aboard?"

"Plenty."

"A compass?"

"Several of them."

"Good! We need them."

"Then we'll get them for you."

By the time the Sky Rocket ranged up to the wreck, the six men had all the ship's provisions and compasses ready to carry aboard the air-schooner.

The men eyed the peculiar-looking craft with great curiosity, but made the hawser fast when the two vessels came together, which Jack flung to them.

As soon as the food was transferred to the schooner, the men came aboard, cast off the hawsers, and the wreck drifted away.

She had not gone far ere she suddenly reared up, then plunged down and sank.

"You came up just in time," remarked one of the sailors to Jack, as the boy eagerly seized upon one of the compasses.

"Evidently," replied the boy. "How came you to get in trouble?"

"The brig Sea Ghost, bound from Liverpool to New York, was a good craft, but she met foul weather and sprung a-leak. The captain and most of the crew put off in the boats. Our boat was smashed, leaving us on board. We patched the leak, the storm cleared, and, after two days, we sighted your craft. But the leak had opened in a new place. The wreck was fast filling when you found us. Had you come much later, we would all have gone down."

"We will put you aboard of the first homeward bound vessel we meet," said Jack, kindly. "Your food and compass has saved us from great trouble, too."

"Isn't this a peculiar kind of craft?"

"An air-ship. You look surprised, but it's a fact."

"Ay, now," added Tim; "so she is. Shall we stow away these provisions, lad?"

"Yes. Meantime, I'll take our reckoning."

The old sailor and the castaways thereupon carried the boxes, cans and kegs below, and by the time they had finished, Jack had himself located.

There was a serious look upon his face when Tim and Fritz joined him in the pilot-house, and he exclaimed:

"We are so far out upon the sea, I propose that we don't turn back now till we find the lost balloonist."

Tim and Fritz were agreeable to this suggestion, and the Dutch boy said:

"But ve didn't vhas made arrangements about stayin' away from home."

"Had either of you any unfinished business on hand there?"

"No'n," replied Fritz, shaking his head.

"I didn't," Tim answered.

"Nor had I," replied Jack.

"Then it's all right," said the sailor.

"We can write and send letters by the first vessel we meet."

"Certainly," assented Fritz, with a nod. "Dot's 'der vay ter fix dings."

"Then as we have every requisite on hand now, and can adjust matters by mail at home," said the boy, "write your letters, and when you are ready I'll send the Sky Rocket up into the air so we can gain a view of the sea for miles. We may thus discover a ship, put the castaways aboard, leave our letters and continue our journey after the balloon."

With this arrangement they separated.

All the castaways had turned in to sleep, as they were very much tired, and a short time afterwards Jack stopped the propellers, and put the helices in operation, when the Sky Rocket arose from the sea like a gull and soared up into the air.

The screaming of the helices aroused the sleeping sailors, and they all came rushing up on deck in alarm, to learn the cause of the noise.

Startled over their strange position they began to shout.

"Lower her to the sea!" yelled one of them.

"We want to go down!" cried another.

"Do you want to kill us?" groaned a third.

"Don't alarm yourselves," laughed Jack, "we are safe up here."

"Suppose the wheels stop and we drop down?" shouted the fourth.

"Impossible!" insisted the boy.

"Lord! I'm as sick as a dog!" gasped the fifth sailor.

All the rest were sickened.

They could stand sea-sickness, but the buzzing and roaring in their ears, the pressure on their lungs, and the nauseous feeling of their stomachs soon rendered them very miserable, and they laid down on the deck and still begged to be lowered to the sea.

Jack brought the schooner to a pause at a height of nine hundred feet, and swept the sea below with a powerful binocular.

At a distance of over sixty miles away to the eastward, he saw a small, dark streak rising skyward from the sea, and pointing toward it, he said:

"Fritz, there's a steamship now, coming this way."

"Me und Dim vhas got our mails retty," said Fritz, who stood out on deck.

"So have I. Now, then, my good fellows, you will soon be on the sea again."

He addressed this remark to the sailors, who thereupon ceased their grumbling, and heading the air-schooner toward the craft, he started her off.

The big driving wheel added a roaring sound to the shriek of the helices, and the Sky Rocket shot through the air as swiftly as an arrow.

"Come now—avast thar an' cheer up, my hearties!" cried Tim, coming out of the deck-house and addressing the sailors. "Yer all thinks as this are a pretty resky thing ter undergo, but 'Lor' save yer, 'tain't nothin' ter wot I once went through when I wuz in ther navy, aboard o' ther ole frigate Wabash, in ther late war."

"What happened to you?" asked one of the castaways, sitting up and staring at Tim in surprise; and with their curiosity aroused, the rest followed suit, when Tim uttered a cough and said:

"Ther enemy sent up a balloon, an' they floated over our craft an' begun to drop bombs down on our decks. Ther drag-rope grapnel o' ther balloon caught on our bulwarks, an' I volunteered ter climb up ther rope an' fire a bomb under ther basket ter stop 'em by blowin' ther balloon ter pieces. Wall, messmates, I took a bomb, fastened it to a sling, put it aroun' my neck, an' away I clumb up ther rope. Ther fellers in ther balloon seen me an' began ter fire down at

me. I reckon as they wuzn't good shots, 'cause none on 'em hit me——"

"Oh, my!" gasped one of the listeners, and the rest held their breath with excitement.

"Up I shinned," continued Tim, warming up to his work, "and I got under ther bastick, hitched on ther bomb and lit ther fuse. But I hadn't slid half way down the rope, when bang she went, busting like a gun. Ther balloon and car wuz blowed ter pieces, and thar I hung on ther rope, two hundred feet above ther sea, a-watching ther remains of ther men and their balloon a-flyin' through ther air, smashed ter smithereens. In a little while they all disappeared, and I begun ter slide down ter ther ship again."

"Ay, but what held the rope up when the balloon was gone?" asked a sailor.

Tim gave a slight start, and a perplexed look crossed his face, but after a moment's thought a grin overspread his features, and he said:

"Oh, I fergot ter tell yer as it wuz a-rainin' and a-freezin'. an', true as you're born, that 'ere rope froze as stiff as a poker, and I went down as easy as if it wuz a greased pole."

And with a triumphant look Tim hobbled away, leaving the sailors to digest the yarn as best they could.

In the course of an hour the Sky Rocket was close to the approaching vessel, which was now made out to be one of the regular mail steamers, and they saw the crew and passengers all up on deck watching the air-schooner.

The boy and his friends handed their letters to the cast-aways, asked them to post them when they reached port, a long rope ladder was let down over the bulwarks, and the Sky Rocket was lowered over the vessel:

Down she settled until the end of the ladder trailed on the deck of the big liner, and Jack shouted down to the sailors to hold and steady it.

Two of them did so, and the boy kept his wonderful air-schooner along with it, when all the sailors shook hands with Tim and Fritz, and descending the ladder they reached the deck of the steamer, Jack going with them.

Here the boy told the captain the story of the sailors' wonderful escape, when a man emerged from the cabin.

He was Howell, the aeronaut.

CHAPTER VII.

THE COLLISION.

Jack had gained such a good view of Donald Howell while he lay in the car of the balloon, that he could not be mistaken in the man, and his suspicion was further confirmed by observing the balloon, now collapsed, packed away, with the ropes and basket in one of the empty rooms on deck.

The aeronaut was pale and weak, walked with a cane, and looked as if he had been very sick.

But to assure himself that he was not mistaken, Jack approached him, studied his features a moment, and then asked:

"Isn't your name Donald Howell?"

"That is my name," assented the man.

"You are an aeronaut?"

"Such is my profession, sir."

"And you recently ascended from Wrightstown?"

"Exactly so. How came you to be so well posted?"

Jack explained the matter, and pointing up at his air-schooner, he startled the man with a good view of it.

Howell became very much excited.

"That's a wonderful air-vessel," he remarked.

"How did you escape from the sky with your life?" asked Jack.

"Well sir, it is a marvel to me that I managed to do it," the aeronaut replied. "Banda Medima gave me an ugly stab wound, and I must have remained senseless a long time. When I finally recovered, the balloon was dropping slowly toward the sea. I was too weak to help myself, but luckily the balloon was sighted by the crew of this vessel and I was picked up. Attended since then by a doctor who was on board, I have since been recovering, and hope to be entirely well by the time we reach port."

Jack then told Howell about the accusation Banda Medima had made against him, and the balloonist became very much excited and said:

"In the main his story is true, and perhaps he was justified in seeking to take my life. But I did not attack the man without reason when I found that he had discovered the secret of the great wealth hidden in that mountain crater."

"Was any part of his story not true?"

"Yes. He tried to enshroud it in a superstitious air. There was nothing supernatural about the crater dwellers."

"Will you tell me why you attacked Medima?"

"That is my secret. It is a mystery you may learn. I wanted to keep the location of that jewel mine a secret."

Jack said very little more, for there was a black squall sweeping up in the sky, and he returned aboard the Sky Rocket and explained to his friends how the aeronaut was saved.

To keep the air-schooner where she then was would have endangered her, so the boy sent her flying up in the sky to get above the storm clouds in a place of safety.

"We may as well return to Wrightstown now," said he to his friends. "Dame fortune has favored us so that we need look no further for the man."

Accordingly the Sky Rocket was headed homeward.

She went along slowly against a head wind for a couple of hours, the boy raising and lowering her alternately in an effort to find a favored current, without being able to do so.

The storm below the air-schooner kept getting worse, and the boy presently leveled a glass down at the sea through an opening in the stormy clouds.

He beheld the vessel Donald Howell was upon, and saw that it was laboring in a terrific gale.

Within the next half hour the darkness intensified so much upon the sea that objects ten yards off became utterly invisible.

A vivid flash of lightning lit up the scene presently, and it was instantly followed by a terrific chorus of cries from the tempest-tossed ocean.

By the blinding glare Jack and his friends caught sight of an ocean tragedy which they would never forget.

A huge steamship, coming from a direction opposite that in which the vessel was going on which Howell was, had suddenly crashed into the aeronaut's ship.

The collision made a noise that arose above the noise of the storm, as the two vessels' bows came together, the stranger crushing in the bows of the ship Jack had alighted upon.

A terrible wail arose from the passengers.

The strange ship disappeared in the gloom a moment later and darkness fell.

But ere the doomed steamer which had been cut down vanished from view, Jack saw that her bow had been crushed in like an egg-shell.

She undoubtedly was filling and would sink.

The boy awaited a second flash and by its light he saw that the vessel was doomed.

The heavy seas were breaking over her, the crew was getting the boats ready, the terrified passengers were donning life-preservers and a scene of the wildest confusion was prevailing.

As soon as the lightning was gone, the darkness swallowed up the tragic scene.

Tim and Fritz had witnessed the collision and the moment they recovered from the horror that overwhelmed them the old sailor cried:

"They're lost! They're lost!"

"Ach Gott! id vhas awful!" ejaculated Fritz.

"Hold on!" cried Jack. "Don't give way, boys! We may save some of the unfortunates if we can get down to them in time. Fritz, man the search-light till we dispel this horrible gloom! Tim, get the grapnel ready!"

The boy slackened the speed of the helices, and the Sky Rocket went down through the stormy clouds toward the sea.

As soon as she got under them they found themselves in a deluge of rain and a gale of wind.

Below them they saw the lights on the wrecked steamer, and afar in the distance the fast disappearing lanterns of the ship that caused the damage.

As soon as the Dutch boy manned the search-light Jack turned on the current, and a blinding streak flashed out from it upon the sea.

Fritz turned the light until it was reflected upon the rolling steamer, and Tim dropped the rope-ladder over.

Down settled the Sky Rocket, until at last she hovered twenty feet above the deck of the doomed steamer.

The cries of the poor wretches upon her deck could be plainly heard, and when they saw the air-schooner and realized that help was coming their gratitude knew no bounds.

Down lower sank the Sky Rocket.

"Ship ahoy!" screamed the boy.

"Ahoy!" came the reply in fifty voices.

"Is the steamer a total wreck?"

"Nothing can save her," the captain replied,

"How many are there of you?"

"Over two hundred of crew and passengers."

"I think we can carry you. At any rate, I'll try. Come up the ladder to our deck one by one."

This invitation was eagerly obeyed.

Within a short time the entire crew were on board of the air-schooner, and Jack had to keep the helices whirling at full speed in order to maintain so much weight.

It taxed the wheels to their utmost capacity to maintain the schooner, but she gallantly held her own.

The boy then started the driving wheel, and away she dashed through the air at a height of forty feet from the sea, every one of the saved people lying distributed about the deck to evenly balance the Sky Rocket.

On and on through the dark night and ugly storm the rescued people were carried and their vessel went down. Daylight finally came, and with nightfall the land appeared.

Wrightstown loomed up on the coast and the gallant air-schooner went sweeping over the bay and into the village, where the residents saw her.

Their cheers aroused every one.

Down into the square settled the Sky Rocket, and she was instantly surrounded by a large crowd, who soon learned the story of our friends' adventures.

Here the shipwrecked crew showered their thanks upon Jack and left the Sky Rocket.

Among the first to draw near was the circus owner, and as Tim approached him with Donald Howell and Banda Medima, the old sailor said:

"We've earned that 'ere thousand dollars reward, sir."

"Here is the amount," said the man, handing Tim the money, and he went away with the balloonist and the prisoner.

Tim returned to the Sky Rocket, divided the money with Jack and Fritz and amid the cheers of the multitude she was raised in the air and floated back into Jack's workshop, where our friends disembarked, glad to return alive.

CHAPTER VIII.

OFF FOR CEYLON.

A few days later Jack and his two friends had overhauled the air-schooner, and rectified all the errors there were in her construction which had been revealed by the trial they gave her, and by the time they finished she was as near perfect as it was possible to make her.

Repairing to the young inventor's library, it was there decided to make an extended trip in her to the island of Ceylon, a place that Jack was anxious to visit.

"I have heard that there is no end of sport to be had there," said the boy, "and to tell you the truth, the story Medima told us about the strange race of crater dwellers and the fabulous treasure have aroused my curiosity to visit the mountains."

"Ay, now," replied Tim, "as long as we're a-goin' ter heave inter that 'ere port, I don't see why we shoudn't see wot thar is in ther story o' ther treasure."

At that moment a servant announced a caller, and when Jack told her to usher him in, the man entered.

To every one's surprise they saw that he was Donald Howell.

"You look amazed to see me," said the balloonist, "but you will not when you hear what I have come to tell you."

"Be seated, sir," politely said Jack, pointing to a chair.

"Thank you," was the reply, as the aeronaut complied.

"I have heard it rumored about the village that you are going to Ceylon, and as my engagement with the circus expires to-day, and I am very anxious to go to Ceylon and to have a ride in your wonderful air-ship, I have come to offer my services as a practical aeronaut, to go with you."

"But we did not calculate to take any one," said Jack.

"I would be a valuable auxiliary, for I am an expert balloonist. I am well acquainted with life in Ceylon, speak the language of the natives there, and I wish to make you a proposition in regard to the treasure Banda Medima told you about there."

"And that proposition?" queried Jack, interestedly.

"To lead you to the crater, help you to collect a vast fortune in rubies, and share the profit with you."

He spoke frankly, and acted altogether like an honest man.

It was evident to Jack, however, that he had another object in view to which he made no allusion, and the boy asked:

"Can you honestly say you have no other purpose in going, there?"

A guilty look overspread the man's face for a moment, but recovering from his momentary confusion, he said quietly:

"Should I say such a thing as that I would lie. I have another object of a personal nature which I do not care to disclose. Aside from this, however, let me tell you that as Medima has escaped from the circus owner ere we could land him in jail, if we don't go to Ceylon after those rubies he will forestall us by getting them."

"Escaped, eh?" said Jack, with a start. "That is unfortunate."

"Well, what say you, can I go with you, or shall I go alone?"

Jack pondered a moment.

There could be no harm in taking the man.

Besides, being a useful member, he might lead them to a fortune.

In a few moments the young inventor had his mind made up.

"You can go with us!" said he.

"Good!" said Howell, in satisfied tones. "You won't regret it."

"In three days we depart. Get here on time."

"You can depend upon me, Mr. Wright. I am grateful to you for saving my life from the wreck, so you may feel perfectly assured that I shall by my devotion show my gratitude."

And so saying, the balloonist departed.

Our friends then busied themselves with their preparations for a hunting trip, and by the end of two days everything was in readiness for departure.

The arsenal was stored with arms and ammunition, the larder was supplied with imperishable food, and scores of useful articles were packed away in case of need.

They then arranged their business affairs and retired.

On the following morning Donald Howell arrived at the house with a valise, his face clean shaven, a traveling cap and suit on, and his thin, dark face wreathed in smiles.

He was so enthusiastic over aeronautics that the purposed journey he was to make in such a peculiar air-vessel filled him with eager impatience to see how the Sky Rocket operated.

"I'm on hand in time, you see," he remarked to Jack, as he stepped into the workshop where the three friends were assembled, "and I must say, Wright, you've solved a great problem by this invention. I never expected to see aerial navigation perfected beyond ballooning in my day."

"Well, come aboard, as we are ready for a start," replied the boy, "for the sooner we get off the better. My! But it's a beautiful day, and the wind is just right to carry us flying over the Atlantic. Say, Tim, where are Bismarck and Whiskers?"

"Stowed away in their cabin," replied the old sailor.

Jack looked up at the sliding roof which had been opened, and calling in several of his workmen he told them to cast off the hawsers when they got aboard.

Fritz was already on deck, so the rest ascended the accommodation ladder and passed into the pilot-house, Howell expressing boundless admiration for everything he saw, for at the time of his first trip in the boat he had not been able to observe anything much.

When the lines were cast off Jack started the helices and the boat arose through the open roof and soared up above the village with a loud, buzzing sound.

Most every one in the village had got wind of their intended departure, and the streets were black with people who had come out on purpose to see them off.

Sound rises to an extraordinary height, and the cheers uttered by the people easily reached the ears of the Sky Rocket's crew as the air-schooner darted away.

Obedying their impulses our friends waved their caps and handkerchiefs to the crowd below, but there was a strong current of air into which Jack stopped his wonder, and it swept them out to sea with celerity.

Tim and Fritz then manned the sails, and taking in a reef, they spread the snowy canvas to the breeze and the Sky Rocket's speed was so augmented that she soon left the land out of sight astern, and shot ahead at a height of a thousand feet above the rolling sea.

It was a fine day, and the air-schooner worked well, for she had been thoroughly overhauled.

The admiration of Donald Howell increased continually as he saw how nicely everything had been calculated, how well adapted everything was to its place, and with what perfection the boat worked.

"With such machines as this our government could overcome any nation in war," he remarked, as he stood beside Jack at the wheel in the pilot-house.

"The Sky Rocket was not built for that purpose, though," said Jack, quietly, as he glanced up at a register, and saw that they were going at a fifty miles an hour clip.

"Well, it is magnificently suited to the mission she is on,"

said the balloonist, "for we will only have to drop down into the mountain crater you are bound for, and there pick up all the jewels you can carry away."

"Do you know anything about the tribe of crater dwellers of whom Banda Medima spoke?" queried Jack.

An odd smile played over the man's face.

"I ought to!" he replied. "I lived among them once, for a long time—the husband of their queen. But for a certain transgression they were going to murder me, and I therefore fled."

"Ah!" said Jack, surprised at this information. "They are a dangerous race, then? We must beware of them."

"They are base, cruel and savage—jealous of any one invading the crater, and the born enemies of all white men."

At this juncture Tim called Howell out to attend to some duty, and Jack was left alone to ponder over his future plans.

During the trip across the Atlantic the boy found that Howell was a smart, affable fellow, thoroughly familiar with aerial navigation, meteorology and other sciences.

The Sky Rocket filled him with delight, but he could not again be induced to speak of his past life.

In due course of time the blue Mediterranean appeared in sight beneath them, and following its African coast the Sky Rocket was finally driven across the hot desert of Arabia down to the Indian Ocean.

The journey was made in a remarkably short space of time, and heading for the southern extremity of Hindostan, the island of Ceylon at last appeared in sight.

A look of fierce joy swept over Howell's features as the Sky Rocket soared over the island, for he felt that the hidden purpose he had in view was fast nearing its culmination.

Jack lowered the air-schooner to within three hundred feet of the ground, and as his glances swept over the landscape below, he turned to Howell, and said:

"Your prediction is true. This country is a hunter's paradise."

"In no other country will you find wilder sport than there is here," replied the balloonist. "Just cast your glance before us now, and you will witness one of its fearfulest forms."

CHAPTER IX.

ELEPHANT HUNTING.

Below the Sky Rocket there was a field of rorrakan, a grain like clover seed, upon which the Cingalese almost entirely subsisted, surrounded by a dense thorny bush, which led to a chena jungle ground or cultivated field.

In the trees were watch-houses erected, which were full of people, who were shrieking and yelling at the top of their voices to scare a herd of elephants into the jungle, who were devastating the rorrakan plants.

The chena jungles are dense and thorny to such an extent that a man cannot penetrate them without being torn to pieces by the briars, yet they are the favorite resort of wild animals, the impervious character of the bush forming a secure retreat for them.

The people in the trees were Veddahs—an extremely ugly race, short, but sinewy, with long, uncombed locks falling to their waists, looking like horses' tails, their nature causing them to despise money, but feel thankful for a knife, hatchet, gaudy-colored cloth, or a metal pot for cooking.

Driven from the two feet high sweet grass by the yells and shouts of the natives, the elephants retreated into the jungle, only to reappear at another point and renew their depredations.

The herd consisted of a bull, a mother, and a young one or "poonchy," and when the natives started them again

with a deep cunning, they retreated down wind, breaking down boughs, and crushing with their huge, horny feet cactus that grew to a height of seven yards.

From their position overhead, Jack and his friends had a good view of all that transpired, and heard the wh-r-r-r of the elephants as they wended their pursuers and went crashing away.

The Veddahs were led by the Rhatamahatmeya, or head man of their village.

They were believers in the presence of devils—a faithless, cunning, treacherous and cowardly race, superstitious in the extreme, and Buddhists by religion.

The elephants they were pursuing separated, and they followed the bull, which was heading for a tank or lake.

These tanks in Ceylon are the result of immense labor in past ages.

Valleys were inclosed by huge dams of solid stone that checked the course of rivers and formed great lakes, thus making reservoirs for water to irrigate the rice fields, and supplying the wants of the now extinct tribes.

Around these tanks there yet remains the ruins of ancient cities.

It was toward one of these tanks, then, that the elephant made its way, pushed by the native trackers, and reaching the water and mud, he plunged in belly deep, and stood there washing himself and splattering himself with mud, to get a coating to prevent the stinging insects tormenting him.

He did not remain there long, for he scented his pursuers, and then waded across to the opposite shore, where there stood a tamarind tree.

It was plastered with mud to the height of twelve feet, and formed a rubbing-post for the beasts after wallowing in the tank.

He was a noble-looking beast, his head almost white with flesh-colored spots, that gave him a savage appearance.

When he got upon the bank his head was swinging to and fro, his ears were flapping, and there was a dangerous look about him, for he did not fancy having been disturbed at a feast of lotus-leaves in the tank.

He had been tearing up bunches of them, washed them carefully with his trunk, crushed the juicy stems, and stuffed the tangled masses into his mouth with great relish.

The appearance of the natives in hot pursuit caused him to pass his rubbing-post, and go crashing among the jungle toward the ruin which bordered this particular tank.

There were palaces of shapeless and crumbled mounds of bricks, massive pillars formed of a single stone fifteen feet high, standing in upright rows throughout the jungle for many miles.

It was evident that they once supported vast buildings, which now were mostly gone, leaving the pillars to stand like tombstones over their vanished magnificence.

Among the few that yet remained were several dagobas—great monuments of bricks, once covered with white cement, and decorated with elaborate devices, their height averaging one hundred feet.

Mounds of jungle and rank grass overgrew them.

A strange looking temple excavated in the rock remained, containing several recumbent images of Buddha, carved out of rock, sixty feet long.

Evidently a powerful nation had once existed there.

It was doubtless owing to the drought to which Ceylon is subjected that caused the elephants and other beasts to haunt the tanks.

The natives, who had been pressing on in pursuit of the elephant, now saw the air-schooner, and being a very superstitious race, they became frightened at the appearance of the Sky Rocket and ran away in terror, giving up the hunt.

"They are afraid of the schooner!" laughed Jack, as he watched them.

"Ay, now, I reckon as they thinks as we're some demon!" chuckled Tim.

"It's a pity to let that elephant escape," regretfully said Howell.

"Vot do yer say ter me troppin' someding down on his het?" asked Fritz.

"No—that would not be any sport," replied Jack, "but I would just as soon descend to the ground and hunt the elephant with a rifle.

The rest eagerly assented to this, as it would be rare sport.

Jack accordingly sent the air-schooner to the earth.

She landed upon a fine lawn and rested upon four flanges that flew out of the hull, holding her up steadier than the sea.

Tim in the meantime had procured several rifles and pistols, but refused to join in the hunt, as he feared he might come to grief with his wooden leg.

An accommodation ladder was then let down over the side and Jack went down, followed by Fritz and Howell.

They had located the elephant in the jungle and therefore knew just where to head for him.

The three advanced toward the jungle carefully, and Jack sent Fritz off to the right and Howell to the left, to come in at the sides and thus hem the elephant completely in.

They were close to the lake, the waters of which at certain seasons of the year swelled and flooded this jungle, but the lake was then diminished in size, owing to the dry weather.

The water had retired fifty yards, leaving a deep bed of slime, covered with decayed vegetable matter, and the top of the slime had hardened in the heat of the sun, forming a cake over the soft mud beneath.

Jack crept into the jungle on his hands and knees and quietly advanced toward the elephant, which was splashing the mud up over his immense body with the greatest delight.

The briars tore Jack's clothes and lacerated his flesh till he bled from scores of wounds, but he kept straight ahead.

He was guided by the noise made by the animal, and soon came in sight of him, when the unfortunate snapping of a twig caused the big beast to cock his ears and raise his trunk in the air.

He stood thus for a few moments, and then moved off toward the water with great strides, the boy remaining quietly hidden in his covert, and wondering whether Fritz would first encounter him.

A moment afterwards the brute disappeared.

"Gone!" muttered the young inventor, in disgust.

He crept ahead again, wondering whether the beast would take to the lake, and crossing a strip of open ground, he neared the slimy, caked-over ground before referred to.

Listening failed to locate the monster now, for he was keeping exceedingly still, and the boy passed into the jungle again.

The elephant had left the broad track, which could easily have been followed at an upright position, but as there were chances of the beast seeing him, the boy preferred to plunge into the jungle, and thus keep his body screened from view.

Cautiously advancing a few paces, Jack kept peering ahead, when there suddenly sounded a thud, a crackling, the scream of a bullet, and a moment afterwards the shot exploded ahead of him.

It came from Howell.

The weapons used were worked by the pneumatic principle and were noiseless repeaters of Jack's invention, the conical bullets being charged like bombs, bursting only when they were arrested by their flight.

It may be inferred how destructive they were.

A moment after the shot was fired there sounded a terrific trumpeting from the elephant, the crashing of the jungle, and

the bushes suddenly parted ahead of Jack and the beast appeared unexpectedly.

With trunk and tail erect it charged on the boy with an impetuous fury beyond all description.

He raised his rifle quickly and fired point blank at it, but the ball failed to arrest its rush, and as it was then within two yards of him Jack turned and ran, unable to fire at such close quarters.

The mighty giant ran for him with the fury of a whirlwind, and the boy bounded into the track it had made for better running, his clothing torn to shreds by the hooking briars.

He sped away at the top of his speed, but the elephant rapidly began to overhaul him and soon came within two feet, its long trunk extended to seize the boy.

Upon observing his peril, Jack sprang off at an angle, when the beast overshot him and rushed ahead several yards.

The boy was then in the clearing, but he stood upon the eaked mud.

He had not gone five steps, however, when the cake broke and down he sunk, buried to his hips in the soft mud beneath, which held him as if it were a vise.

A cry of despair pealed from his lips, for in falling his rifle fell from his hand out of his reach, and he could not get up on the surface again despite all his efforts.

The elephant now turned around, and seeing the boy it made a great rush for him, splashing the mud up in great showers as it came.

CHAPTER X.

HELD TO THE FLAMES.

The elephant, instead of charging with his head thrown back, and held high, rendering a front shot uncertain, lowered it, and went splashing toward Jack, uttering a shrill, triumphant sound.

The boy thought his doom was sealed, for elephants can make rapid progress through deep mud, the formation of their hind legs, having knees instead of hocks, giving them facilities for such work, for what is almost like a plowed field, on hard ground, to a man, is smooth walking for them.

On came the enraged beast, its small inflamed eyes fixed with a wicked look upon the helpless boy, and it had just arrived within two yards of him and was reaching out its trunk, when a report sounded.

The shot came from the left-hand side of the jungle.

It struck the elephant behind its ear and burying itself in its tough head, exploded there, tearing a great hole in its skull.

Down it fell upon its side like a log, and a tremendous shower of mud flew up in the air and came down on Jack, covering him.

But the beast was dead!

"Saved!" gasped Jack, wiping the ooze from his eyes.

"Donner und blitzen! How's dot for a shot?" roared Fritz's voice.

As soon as Jack could see, he glanced around, and observed the grinning Dutch boy standing nearby with a rifle in his hand.

There was a proud look of triumph on his face over having slain such a mighty monster, too, for it was his first shot at such game.

"Help! Help!" cried Jack.

"Vait a leedle," responded Fritz, "und I got yer ondt."

He disappeared in the jungle, but soon returned, with a long tough vine in his hand, and flinging one end to Jack, he shouted cheerily:

"Crab holt of dot end, und I bull me you ower here."

"Good enough! I've had a narrow escape from death! Now haul away, Fritz, and I'll soon get out of this pickle," said Jack.

The Dutch boy braced himself, and finally dragged Jack out of the mud, when Jack recovered his rifle.

They got out of the jungle swamp and started back for the air-schooner, when they were startled by hearing several reports, the trumpeting of an elephant, and the voice of Tim yelling frantically.

"Jack, ahoy! Jack, ahoy!"

"Tim is in trouble, Fritz!" the boy exclaimed.

"Ach Himmel! Und dere vhas more ouf dem efelants alretty!"

They dashed ahead and soon reached the vicinage of the Sky Rocket, when another report rang out from the bushes, and they dashed into the clearing just in time to see the female and poonchy, which had been with the tank beast they had finished.

The last shot toppled the young one over, and the mother rushed off raising her trunk, when, to Jack's horror, he saw that she held Tim by it.

"Avast thar, yer lubber!" roared the old warrior, as he wrapped his arm around the elephant's trunk and punched the beast with his disengaged fist. "Untoggle yer bowsprit an' set me aground!"

The enraged animal paid no heed to his blows but rushed away, and a moment afterwards Howell sprang from the shrubbery.

He had dropped the poonchy, ran up to his prize with a knife in his hand and cut off its tail for a trophy.

Jack and Fritz ran after the female.

"If we don't rescue Tim, that beast will kill him," said the boy.

"Dere she go in by der chunkle!" panted the fat boy.

They kept on the elephant's trail, and as soon as they ranged up to within fifty yards of it, Jack fired a shot at her.

With a roar she tossed Tim aside and he landed in the thorny bushes, and throwing back her head, she went crashing ahead with a wound in her side that bled profusely.

On ran Jack, impetuously, when without a warning the animal suddenly wheeled around and charged on him.

He paused and raised his rifle to his shoulder, while Fritz, with a cry of alarm, sprang into the jungle and fled.

Standing stock still, Jack remained like a statue, taking careful aim at the oncoming mountain of flesh, and when the beast arrived within ten paces of where he stood, he pulled the trigger.

Ping! whistled the ball.

It struck square in the beast's forehead.

There it burst with a muffled report, and a mass of flesh was scattered in all directions, when the beast pitched headlong and fell dead.

Jack had not budged an inch from his position.

He then strode up to the carcass, and examined the beast.

It measured fourteen feet at the shoulder, and was of immense girth.

"That was well done, Mr. Wright!" said a voice behind him.

"Ah! Is that you, Howell?" exclaimed Jack, with a start, glancing around.

"You could not have done better."

"Nothing can resist those explosive bullets. But have you seen Tim?"

"He and Fritz met. They were horribly scratched. Neither was seriously hurt, though."

"Fortunate! I didn't expect to find you here."

"Oh, you imagined I might run away?"

"Exactly. How is it you didn't?"

"Because I wasn't afraid of the brute."

"Come—let us return to the ship."

"Fritz and Tim returned to her, afraid to continue the hunt."

They went back and boarded the Sky Rocket, and there found the Dutch boy and the old sailor attending to their wounds.

Jack cleaned himself, and, changing his clothes, he found a good supper prepared by the Dutch boy to which they all sat down.

"Hunting elephants is great sport," said the boy, during the course of the meal, "but 'pon my word it's risky business. How did you happen to get into trouble with the poonchy and its dam, Tim?"

"Waal, yer see, arter yer all left, I went ashore," said the old sailor, expanding, "an' ther first thing I knowed along they came. I then hopped over to 'em, an' aimin' my pistol I fired a broadside. Ther first shot near killed ther little one, an' ther second shot blowed a big hole clean through ther ole un's hulk so I could see daylight on ther starboard side. I then——"

"But when I killed the dam and examined her, she had no such wound," interposed Jack, "and I saw Howell kill the young one."

"Waal, now, mebbe I'm mistaken," said Tim, reflectively. "Leastways, lad——"

"I'm quite satisfied with your explanation," interposed Jack, who saw that the old liar could not tell a straight story if he wanted to.

When the meal was finished, night settled down, and as it was agreed that they remain where they were till the following day, they spent the evening singing songs, while Fritz played the accompaniments on his accordion, and mapping out their plans.

Then the watch was divided, and Jack and Howell assumed duty.

Along towards midnight, the boy, who was out on deck, pacing to and fro, suddenly scented something burning, and glanced around.

He saw nothing suspicious, but kept sniffing at the air, and finally calling Howell out of the pilot-house, he asked him:

"Don't you smell something burning?"

"I do. But I can't see any fire," answered the balloonist, peering around.

"Don't that look like smoke up there in the sky?"

"Sure enough—so it is. I hope the jungle grass isn't afire."

"Does it become ignited?"

"The natives burn large tracks of ground sometimes, to cultivate it, and these fires sweep over miles of ground sometimes."

"Do you suspect that to be the case now?"

"It may be, sir."

"Wait! I will get a view of the country," said Jack.

He climbed up the shrouds towards the big helix on the foremost, and, as he had a good view over the jungle, he glanced around.

Off to the windward there was a mighty blaze, that came sweeping along towards the place where the Sky Rocket stood, and he saw at a glance that the entire jungle, half a mile away, was afire.

There was a ruddy glow shooting up to the sky with clouds of dark, lowering smoke, and thousands of flying cinders and sparks.

"The jungle is afire, and the wind is sweeping the flames this way!" cried Jack.

"We had better escape, then, while we have time!" said the aeronaut, in nervous tones, for he knew from past experience how dangerous these fires were to anyone who happened to be in their way.

"By ascending above the flames we can get away," said

the boy, as he descended to the deck and hurried into the pilot-house. "Judging by the speed at which the fire is rushing this way, it will be upon us in the course of five minutes."

"Shall I arouse Tim and Fritz?"

"No. I don't need them," replied the boy.

He turned the lever, putting the battery into communication with the machinery, when it got in operation, and the helices whizzed around.

Although there was half power on, there came a straining at the schooner, and she should have arisen but she failed to budge.

Jack looked surprised and perplexed.

Then he put on more power, but the Sky Rocket remained stationary.

"Heavens!" he gasped. "What can be the matter?"

"There is something anchoring us to the ground," replied Howell.

"If we don't move soon we are doomed. I'll put on full power."

Jack now turned the lever all the way around, and although the wheels screamed like steam whistles, the schooner did not move.

Thoroughly amazed, Jack rushed outside, and peered over the rail, but saw nothing binding the Sky Rocket down.

He then descended and made a circuit of the boat.

Now the trouble became apparent.

The flanges on which the boat rested stood out at angles, and the shock of alighting had driven them deep in the ground, where they stuck fast.

To get free they would have to dig them up.

CHAPTER XI.

SAVED BY A HAIR'S-BREADTH.

"Howell, come down here with a pick and shovel!" shouted Jack.

"Have you found out yet what holds the Sky Rocket down?" answered the man, anxiously, as he hung the implements overboard and followed them.

Jack rapidly explained the cause of the trouble, and they got at one of the flanges and began to dig at it vigorously, taking the dirt away from about it, when suddenly the strength of the helices tore them out.

The dirt flew up in a shower and the air-schooner darted skyward.

Jack had left the helices buzzing, and the Sky Rocket had liberated herself so suddenly and unexpectedly that the boy was taken off his guard.

"Board her!" he shouted.

"She's free!" gasped Howell.

The balloonist rushed for the ladder and grasped it just as the end was rising from the ground, and Jack came on behind him.

But the boy was too late to catch it.

He saw Howell being whisked up over his head into the air, and with a desperate leap the boy seized the man's foot with one hand.

There he clung with all his might.

He was only sustained by one hand, and was instantly lifted high in the air, his body swinging like a pendulum with the swaying ladder.

Howell had a tenacious grip on the bottom round of the ladder and peered down at the boy with a frightened look, for he could not realize how he was to get up to the deck of the schooner from where he then hung.

Besides, the fast deepening gulf yawning beneath made

him dizzy and faint, for there being full power on the helices, the Sky Rocket made extraordinary rapid ascent.

"Hang on!" cried Jack, for he realized that if the man's grip relaxed they would both fall to the earth again and be consumed by the burning lemon grass.

"How are we to get up to the boat?" groaned the man.

"Let me climb up your body and I'll save you."

"All right—come ahead!"

Jack swung himself up till he got a hold with both hands, and then by sheer strength he began to climb up the man's legs and body till he got hold of the ladder and secured a footing.

Then he reached down and grasped Howell's wrist.

Pulling the man up, he helped him to gain a footing, and this once done, it was easy for them to ascend to the deck.

By that time the most suffocating heat waves were puffing up into their faces, for the glaring red furnace was roaring directly beneath the ascending boat, and she was then shooting through the smoke.

Still, she mounted so rapidly that she was out of reach of the flames, and in a few minutes more left the smoke clouds below her hull.

Up, up, up she went, higher and higher, and rushing into the pilot-house, Jack saw by the register that she had attained an altitude of two thousand feet.

He then stopped her ascent, and Tim and Fritz rushed up from below, aroused from their slumbers by the sudden jar of arising.

A few words explained the situation to them.

They glanced down below, and witnessed a strange scene.

In the direction from whence the fire came there stretched a vast black expanse, while the sea of fire, forming a long, narrow body, curved ahead at the top, rushed along the earth, flinging up clouds of sparks and smoke, while a red-hot trail followed it up.

Its onward progress was very rapid, and herds of beasts and flocks of birds went scampering and flying before its advance.

In a short time the flames rolled up to a huge tank, and sweeping around the dark sheet of water, came to a pause.

Raging there for some time, they consumed everything inflammable, and finally died out, leaving the earth red-hot around the lake.

"It is over," said Jack, with a sigh of relief.

"Ach! I tink ve vhas petter stay ub here for safeties," said Fritz.

"Ay, now; thar's less danger an' yer might git forty winks out o' it," groaned Tim. "Turn in—it's your watch below, Jack."

The boy was glad to do so, as he was tired and sleepy, and as Howell had not entirely recovered from the effects of the Veddah's stab-wound yet, he also turned in, exhausted from his recent exertions.

Fritz and Tim remained in the pilot-house all night talking, to pass the time away, and the air-schooner remained stationary, as there was no wind blowing, at a height of two thousand feet from the ground.

Suddenly the Dutch boy observed that the Sky Rocket was descending.

"Donner-vetter!" he gasped, springing to his feet. "Dit you vhas sent her down?"

"Bless yer, no! I ain't touched the levers," replied Tim, in surprise.

"Vot's der matter mid her den?" growled Fritz, glancing at the registers.

"Why, that gauge ses as ther power o' ther batteries is diminishin'?"

"Den dot eledricity vhas escabin', for de amound ouf currend vhas goin' away, und dem helices don't vork so qwick alretty!"

"Ay, now, yer'd better examine ther batteries then," said Tim.

Fritz rushed out on deck, and dashed down into the hold.

The moment he got in he saw streaks of blue flame snapping and cracking among the jars, and he hurried back to the shelves.

It was very evident that something had gone wrong with the batteries to make them act in this same manner, and he imagined that the immense amount of electricity in the dry atmosphere had something to do with it.

This was not the case, however, for he suddenly espied Whiskers in a corner, and the monkey gave a squeak and rushed up-stairs.

"Dot ratskals vhas been up to somedings!" gasped Fritz.

An uncomfortable feeling took possession of him, for he knew that the monkey was an imitative beast, and frequently tried to repeat doing things as he saw people doing.

It was as likely as not that he had seen someone working at the batteries, and in the effort to do the same thing he had evidently created this mischief.

There was no other way to account for it.

When Fritz reached the batteries, he saw at a glance that the monkey had uncoupled some of the connecting wires, and the loosened ends coming in contact with the metal machinery, was fast exhausting the accumulator jars and charging the metal work.

Indeed, every bit of metal in the hold was charged with the current, but Fritz did not know this until he accidentally placed his hand upon a steel bar and received a terrific shock.

It knocked him senseless upon the floor.

Fortunately, he landed upon some woodwork, else the current from the metal floor plates might have continued to flow into his body and might have killed him while he lay senseless.

The only way to stop the leak was to shut off every bit of power, but this could not be done while the schooner was held suspended in the air, as it would cause the wheels to stop, when the Sky Rocket would have fallen to the earth.

There lay the Dutch boy, pale and limp, the flashing sparks and blue globules of fire darting around his inanimate body, the crackling sound increasing in volume every moment.

Down, down the Sky Rocket continued to descend, faster and still faster every moment, as the strength of the batteries became weaker and the helices revolved slower, until at last the great vessel almost sunk like a stone.

Alone in the turret, not knowing what was the matter, Tim stood, overcome with horror.

"Fritz! Fritz!" he yelled, frantically, through the speaking tube.

No reply came from the hold, and a cold sweat burst out all over the old sailor's body.

A moment afterward the helices stopped.

Down the schooner pitched headlong, with horrible speed, and a moment afterward she struck the branches of a tree which stood less than ten feet below, when all the power was suspended.

There came a grinding and splitting crash as the great weight of the schooner tore off the branches, and then a terrible shock as the stouter limbs below stopped her descent.

A moment afterwards she remained stationary, firmly wedged in the great tree a dozen feet from the ground.

Tim was sent reeling against the wall, and Jack and Howell were suddenly awakened and knocked on the floor.

The old sailor had presence of mind enough to shut off the current as soon as he recovered his wits, and Jack and the balloonist came flying upon deck and saw at a glance what had befallen the Sky Rocket.

Dashing into the pilot-house across the electrified deck, the young inventor, with a promptness that was wonderful,

secured a wire to one of the binding posts, and running out with the rest of the coil, dropped it to the ground.

The electricity was thus carried from the boat and discharged into the ground.

In the meantime, Tim hurried down into the hold, and seeing Fritz lying there senseless, dragged him up on deck.

There they got at him with restoratives, and after awhile managed to bring him to his senses, when he explained what the trouble had been down in the hold.

Then they made a hurried examination of the boat on the inside and out, and were grieved to see that she was badly battered by her fall.

Many useful articles were smashed to pieces, the machinery was dislocated, and many of the batteries broken.

It was with a sad heart that the boy saw the havoc there was created, for it would take at least a week of hard work to get everything in shape again.

But there was no help for it now, and they considered themselves lucky for escaping with their lives.

CHAPTER XII.

A STRANGE MYSTERY.

On the following morning, upon finding that the air-ship was so firmly wedged in the immense tree that there was no danger of her falling out, the crew of the Sky Rocket began to repair the damage.

Several days passed by before they had everything in order again, and they turned in night after night worn out by their hard work.

Finally everything was repaired.

Jack then set the helices in motion to prevent the air-schooner falling to the ground, and then, assisted by his friends, cut away the boughs that were holding the Sky Rocket jammed as if in a vise.

The boy then caused the boat to alight on the ground, where they set in extra plates where the ones that struck had been broken.

As the boy estimated, it occupied exactly a week to complete the work, and when they were ready to start off again, the Sky Rocket looked as good as ever, although she was minus many useful articles that were destroyed by her fall.

The mischievous monkey suffered the penalty of his crime by being chained fast to the leg of a table, upon observing which the parrot tormented him so that his life became a burden to him.

Jack then announced himself ready to start again.

Accordingly they all embarked, and the wheels were set in motion and the Sky Rocket arose to a height of three hundred feet, when off to the eastward they discerned a high range of mountains.

Turning to Howell the boy asked:

"Which one of those peaks is our destination?"

"The highest of the lot. It's called Pedrotallagalla," the balloonist replied.

The range ran north and south, with several smaller ranges branching off in different directions.

Fritz steered the Sky Rocket under Howell's direction and Jack walked up in the bow with a powerful glass with which he intently watched the cone-shaped mountain.

In an hour they reached it.

The air-schooner was elevated according as they ascended the slope of the mountain, and as Jack glanced down into the gloomy ravines that split its sides in some places, he was startled to see the vividest flashes of lightning playing among the crag.

It was apparent that the mountain was heavily charged

with magnetic ore, which continually drew silent discharges of electricity from the surrounding dry air.

This was a source of anxiety to the boy, for he did not know how it might affect his own batteries, or derange the delicately contrived and sensitive machinery in the air-schooner.

An unusual amount of lodestone was sure to be felt by the Sky Rocket.

"Look out now, Fritz, and keep as near to the ground as you can, or we may get another fall!" he shouted. "The air here is charged with electricity, and any moisture such as low, hanging clouds, or water drawn up by solar heat from streams or lakes might unbalance the schooner and drop her down."

"Donner vetter!" replied the Dutch boy, "yer oughter see how dese instrumends und machineries vhas drubbled mit id alretty. Vhy, dere vhas sparks a-flyin' off uf der bindin'-bosts. und efery ding vhas gracklin' like vire-grackers."

Jack returned to the pilot-house.

"Is it safe to drop down into the crater, Howell?" he asked.

"Perfectly, only that you will find the place filled with the tribe of volcano dwellers of whom I told you," replied the balloonist.

"Then lift the boat up over that ragged edge above us, Fritz," said the boy, and turning to the aeronaut again, he asked: "who are these people—do you know where they originated?"

"According to the traditions current among them," replied Howell, gravely, "they seem to be the descendants of a numerous tribe who once populated the entire island—in fact, the builders of the tanks and ruined cities we met with—the ancient dwellers of Pollanarna."

By this time the Sky Rocket's indicators showed an altitude of over eight thousand feet above the sea level, and the air became very cold and much drier.

Rising above the top of the crater, the schooner was sent over it, and then came to a pause while her crew gazed down into the enormous pit below them.

It was fully a thousand feet deep, and looked like a round bowl, the sides being formed of perpendicular, smooth-faced cliffs, while the bottom was rough and tree-grown.

The interior of the crater measured over a mile in diameter and had a wild, bleak appearance, disagreeable to look at.

Still it was necessary to descend into it, in order to secure the jewels of which Banda Medima had spoken, and telling his companions to arm themselves, Jack assumed charge of the schooner.

He eased the speed of the helices, and the Sky Rocket settled down into the vast inclosure, one-half of which was in the shadow and the other half flooded with sunlight.

As they descended, the boy maintained a lookout for some sign of the crater dwellers, but failed to see anyone.

The Sky Rocket finally came within fifty feet of the bottom and here the boy brought her to a pause, and starting the driving wheel, he sent the boat on a tour of the place.

They then saw that a large tract of the interior was overgrown with shrubbery, a stream ran through it, and the center of the place was elevated in the shape of a huge cone.

It was evidently the core of the volcano, for they saw that its top was open, a huge, dark aperture yawning within it.

The walls of the cliff were honey-combed with innumerable holes, and as they were passing them, Howell exclaimed:

"It is within those apertures that the crater dwellers live."

"How is it that there are none of them in sight?" queried Jack.

"Because they are a race of Albinos with pink eyes and cannot see well in daylight. Consequently, all their prowling is done at night."

At this juncture Fritz pointed down at the stream.

"Stob der schooner!" he exclaimed. "Look at dot stream vonet!"

Jack landed the Sky Rocket beside the water, which was glittering with dazzling splendor, and alighted.

Upon examining it, he found that the sandy bottom was composed of a mixture of mica, quartz, sapphire, ruby and jacinth, but the large proportion of ruby sand was extraordinary.

The clear water magnified the gems into stones of such magnitude that the boy imagined they could not weigh less than half a pound apiece, but scooping up a handful, he discovered that the largest proportion were no larger than a mustard seed.

There were plenty such streams in Ceylon, the natives using this kind of sand for cutting elephants' teeth, for they are so hard that they will produce sparks when struck by an axe.

Finding such evidence of the presence of precious stones here led the boy to have faith in Medima's story.

Indeed, by searching for a few moments, the boy picked up several sapphires and rubies of extraordinary size.

He also observed that the quartz-like ground contained them, but it would become necessary to blast them out.

Fritz and Howell joined the boy.

"You see," said the latter, "it paid to come here."

"A vast fortune lies before us!" cried Jack.

"Can you blame me for trying to prevent Medima coming here with an army of men to subdue the natives and seize this treasure?"

"You knew about it before he did?"

"Years."

"How was that?"

"Because I fled from here to save my life from the crater dwellers."

"They wanted to kill you after you lived among them so long?"

"Yes."

"What for?"

"That I decline to tell."

"Well, suppose we make an effort to get some of these gems."

"Certainly. I am ready and so is Fritz."

Tim was posted at the foremast head to stand guard, and they began their search with a will, and kept it up until late in the afternoon, during which time a large number of stones were collected.

Twilight fell within the crater much earlier than it did on the outside world, and as it grew darker the treasure-seekers returned to the air-schooner, where they found Tim in a state of excitement.

"What's the matter?" asked Jack, in alarm. "Anything gone wrong?"

"Lord save us, didn't ye hear that howlin'?" gasped Tim.

"What howling?"

"Why—ah! There it goes again."

A doleful wail arose on the frosty air.

It was the most weird, inhuman cry Jack ever heard, and it made his blood run cold as he glanced in the direction it came from.

The sound seemed to come from the mound in the center of the crater, and as the four glanced up at its summit a thrill of intense horror shot through them at what they saw.

The figure of a man had suddenly appeared there.

He had nothing on but a shirt of skin and was waving his arms and uttering the awful cries that startled them; but to every one's terror and amazement they could not see that he had a head!

He only remained in sight a few moments. Then he suddenly vanished in the gloom.

Jack was the first to recover his voice and he gasped:

"Great Heaven! Did you see it? He was headless!"

The pallid faces of his companions showed clearly that they had witnessed the phenomenon, but none of them could understand this strange mystery of the mines.

CHAPTER XIII.

AN APPALLING FATE.

For several moments after the headless man had vanished the crew of the air-schooner remained transfixed, gazing at the cone where he stood, in blank astonishment.

The occurrence was so strange that every one was filled with superstitious misgivings, despite their native common sense.

"How a man without a head can live and give utterance to such cries, move about, and act as that fellow did, beats me!" said the young inventor. "Can you explain it, Howell?"

"No," replied the balloonist, shaking his head. "When I was here last there were no such happenings going on. The occurrence has a very supernatural look to me."

"Shiminey Christmas!" gasped Fritz. "I tink ve vhas petter got oud ouf dis blaces alretty. I don't like me dose tings."

"Belay thar!" exclaimed Tim, holding up his hand. "Wot's that!"

There sounded the distant murmur of many voices approaching from among the woods, and in expectation of seeing some such people as the headless man, our friends glanced around, but were relieved to observe that it was only a band of the crater dwellers running toward them.

Jack flashed the search-light upon them, and saw that they were tall, angular men, with fluffy white hair that stood up on end, ghastly white skin devoid of beards, and clothing made of skins with the hair side out.

It consisted of simply a sleeveless gown, fastened around the waist, and in their hands they bore bows and arrows, spears, clubs, and sticks edged with the teeth of wild beasts.

They came to a pause blinded by the powerful light, talking and shouting in the language of the Ceylonese of the jungle, and as their glances fell upon Howell, a fierce shout arose and they dashed toward the air-schooner like an avalanche.

It was very evident that they recognized him as an enemy, and were intent upon attacking him.

The man turned as pale as death and rushed inside the arsenal after Tim and Fritz, when the doors and windows were closed.

"Raise the schooner or they'll board us!" roared the aeronaut to Jack, who stood in the turret, and arming himself, as he saw Tim and Fritz doing, they opened fire upon the natives.

Many of the crater dwellers fell, but they were a dogged race, and retreating behind the trees, those who stood began to bombard the Sky Rocket with their weapons.

Their cries brought scores more from all directions, and within a short time there were hundreds of the strange race swarming all around the schooner.

Realizing that some of the rocks they hurled at the Sky Rocket might smash the helices, Jack started them whirling, and the schooner arose in the air like a bird, followed by a tattoo of spears, clubs, arrows and rocks.

Not until she was one hundred feet above ground did Jack stop her, and there she hung, hovering over the tree-tops, the crater dwellers gazing up at her in astonishment.

Howell went up forward into the turret.

"Shall we drop our shots down on them?" he asked Jack.
 "No," replied the boy. "That would be wanton cruelty."
 "They'd kill us if they had the chance."

"Perhaps. But it looked to me as if it incited them to attack us the moment they beheld you. Was it not so, Howell?"

"Your surmise is correct. They recognized me, I saw at a glance, and they haven't forgotten yet how they hate me."

"That makes it bad for our future dealings with them."

"Yes. Hating me as they do they will, very likely, condemn you all with me. We'd better stay up here to-night."

"It's the safest," assented the boy.

A short time afterward Fritz prepared supper, and when it was finished they examined the jewels they found.

There were quite a number of them, and judging by the weight, would net quite a sum of money in civilization.

Toward midnight the watch was divided and Jack and Howell turned in, leaving Tim and Fritz on duty, while below the air-schooner the crater dwellers had disappeared.

An hour afterward the moon arose high enough to slant some of its mellow light down into the volcano, and despite their high altitude, the fat boy and the sailor could hear the distant roar of elephants on the mountain side and the harsh bark of elks.

While they were talking over their situation in the turret, Tim suddenly gave a howl, sprang to his feet, and clapping his hand to his good leg, he roared:

"Gee-whiz! I've sot on a tack!"

"Iss dot so?" grinned Fritz.

"Oh-h-h!" came a scream the next moment, in Bismarck's voice, and the bird fluttered down from the settee upon which Tim had been sitting, with a piece of the old sailor's pants in its beak.

Tim glared at the bird ferociously for a moment, for it dawned upon his mind that Bismarck had nipped him.

Then he made a dash for the parrot, and hauling off with his wooden leg, he aimed a terrific kick at the bird.

Unluckily for Tim, the parrot hopped out of the way and Fritz got the wooden peg full force on the shins.

He uttered a roar of pain and grappled the old sailor.

"Donner und blitzen!" he yelled. "You vhas proke me mine lecks!"

"Veer off thar till I paralyze that bird!" roared Tim, and after wrestling the fat boy a moment, he threw him.

Down went Fritz with a bang to the floor, and the parrot flew out of the window. Tim dashed through the doorway, and the next moment the bird went over the bulwarks and fluttered down to the ground, where he alighted on a bush.

Out rushed Fritz, just in time to see his pet disappear, and a cry of dismay burst from his lips.

"Ach Himmel!" he groaned, "mine barrots vhas lost."

"Thank Heaven fer that!" fervently said Tim.

"I got me dot bird beck if mine neck I vhas proke!" said Fritz, shaking his fist at the chuckling sailor. "Und vhen back I come look yourselluf oudt dot I don't punch me your nose!"

The Dutch boy ran into the bow and dropped a rope ladder over the side, but it only descended to within fifty feet of the ground, and the boat was double that distance from it.

In no wise daunted, however, Fritz hastened into the pilot-house and lowered the boat till the ladder touched.

Emerging once more he descended the ladder, and upon reaching the ground looked around for Bismarck.

The parrot had flown some distance away, and he started after it, and after a short chase captured it.

But when he turned to retrace his steps to the ladder to his dismay he saw several of the crater dwellers running toward him.

Fritz did not have a weapon of any kind, and the skin-head men were between him and the ladder.

"Helb! Helb!" he yelled, wildly.

Jack and Howell had been alarmed from their sleep by the uproar, and upon seeing the Dutch boy's peril they hastily armed themselves with pistols and descended the ladder.

By this time the natives reached Fritz, and surrounding him they fell upon the fat boy and knocked him down.

In the scuffle that ensued Bismarck made his escape and flew up to the boat, and Fritz was overpowered and bound.

Some of the natives carried him away just as Jack and Howell came running to his assistance.

The boy and his companions had scarcely reached the earth when scores of the crater dwellers appeared from various places of concealment as if by magic and surrounded them. Upon seeing that they had run into an ambushade they began to fire, but the natives, fearless of death, came crowding around them, and they were both knocked senseless and bound.

Several of the natives then began to mount the rope ladder.

Tim started the boat up into the air, and when she was fifty feet higher, he cut the ladder and the wretches fell with it.

The old sailor brought the Sky Rocket to a pause, when suddenly she went flying ahead without the driving wheels being in motion, and drawn by some strange impulse, she went rushing like a cannon-ball straight toward the dark, towering cliffs.

"Lord!" gasped the old sailor, in horrified astonishment, "wot's movin' her? If she strikes them rocks bow on, she'll git smashed."

He made an effort to back her, but despite the powerful wheels she went plunging straight ahead, beyond the desperate sailor's control.

The natives below now carried their prisoners into an opening in the base of the cliffs, by which time they recovered their senses.

Jack and his companions found themselves in a huge cavern, in the middle of which burned a large fire.

The place was crowded with their enemies, who were holding an excited discussion, and upon glancing around, Jack saw that the roof, floor and walls of the place were composed of the whitest crystals.

The ceiling was a beautiful natural stucco, from amidst which hung numerous icicle-like stalactites, tiny jets of water spurting from the ends, while up from the floor rose countless stalagmites, some of which, meeting the pendants, formed slender columns of curious form.

Everything had a grotesque shape, the pervading whiteness lightened the place, and the frosted surfaces of the crystals catching the fire-light, snapped and sparkled as if the entire cavern was lined with diamonds.

In a few minutes the natives finished their debate and several of them separated from the rest, who now retreated into the dense gloom beyond the rays of the fire, and without uttering a syllable, they strode up to the prisoners, and lifting them by their heads and heels, they carried them through the cavern.

Plunging into the deepest gloom, they traversed a wide vaulted passage, and presently emerged into a small chamber with a floor of such soft yielding white sand that they sunk almost knee-deep in it, and proceeded toward several columns in the center of it with the greatest difficulty.

There was a ragged aperture in the roof, of large dimensions, through which the light of heaven might have penetrated had there been any, but as it was then raining out of doors, and the sky being overcast, no light entered.

However, the light of the captives' lanterns partially dispelled the gloom.

By their glow they saw that there was nothing in the chamber but half a dozen shafts of stone, carved into the

grotesque images of ugly idols, and numberless human skulls and skeletons lying half buried in the sand.

They stood grouped in the middle of the chamber, arising from the sandy floor like silent sentinels, and when their captors reached them, the prisoners were tightly bound in standing positions to the shafts.

As soon as this was done the crater dwellers hastened away.

"In Heaven's name, why have they put us here?" muttered Jack, presently.

"Ach, I subbose dey vill shoot at us der next ting," replied Fritz, dismally.

"Mark me, they have a deeper purpose in view," replied the balloonist, solemnly.

An interval of silence followed, each occupied with his gloomiest thoughts.

But they were soon aroused from their reverie.

The lightning outside revealed a startling sight to their gaze.

The surface of the sandy floor suddenly became animated all over, and began to sway and move in a curious manner.

Jack glared down at it, and saw that it was caused by armies of big white ants that came up through the sand.

They seemed to swarm around the captives, and soon began to creep up all over them, biting them and stinging like scorpions.

Not until then did the appalling truth dawn upon Jack's mind.

The boy burst into a cold sweat, turned pale as death, and began to tremble.

"Merciful Heaven!" he gasped, in horror. "They have tied us here to be devoured to death by these ants!"

CHAPTER XIV.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

Dragged along through the air by the strange invisible power that held it as if in a vise, the Sky Rocket was sent flying toward the face of the cliffs so fast that by the time Tim fairly realized what was happening, she was within fifty feet of the wall.

Almost certain destruction to the schooner seemed imminent, and Tim burst into a cold sweat when he found that there was every prospect of the boat being shattered to fragments despite his every effort to check its headlong course.

He glanced up at the sky to see if that had any effect upon the singular occurrence, and saw that numerous heavy banks of storm clouds were sweeping up and obscuring the moon.

A moment afterwards the boat reached the cliffs.

Instead of striking, she passed through an immense fissure and shot ahead into a mighty cavern.

There an awful rumbling roar reached the old sailor's ears faintly at first, but as the schooner rushed forward it became plainer and plainer until it almost deafened him.

Tim recovered his wits a moment afterwards, and turning on the search-light he saw that the Sky Rocket was within what would have been an enormous ravine, but for the fact that the top was inclosed by a roof.

It was evidently a passage of volcanic formation, and it was in this great tunnel that the terrific roaring sounded.

Although the light descended a great distance, the old sailor failed to see the bottom of the chasm below, and he kept a sharp lookout above, as his mind was harassed by the fear that the masts might get broken by striking the roof.

On, on, on with undiminished speed went the schooner for

the space of fully five minutes, when suddenly the reversed driving wheels seemed to take effect.

The Sky Rocket then gradually came to a pause in mid-air.

The roaring sound remained behind the schooner now, and she floated without swaying upon her helices.

It was utterly impossible to go back, Tim knew, so he started her slowly ahead, wondering what the strange influence was that pulled her into this dreadful place.

He had not felt a breath of air, and did not think there was enough lodestone in the magnetic ore of the mountain to attract the schooner as a horseshoe magnet will its armature.

In fact, the old sailor did not know what to ascribe it to, but could not help wondering all the while what it was.

He was also troubled about the fate of his friends, as he had seen them beset by the savages, and dreaded their superior numbers.

If there was any outlet to the dismal tunnel he was in he resolved to hasten back to their assistance, but unfortunately for this resolve, the Sky Rocket suddenly swept under a large opening in the roof, and caught in the vortex of an excessively powerful current of intruding air, she was whirled around and around.

Madly she spun there in space, several times grazing the stony walls of the underground ravine with a loud, scraping sound, that seemed to rend the hapless schooner.

The sailor, in a paroxysm of desperation, turned on the current full force, and gathering all her strength, the Sky Rocket fairly tore herself from the conflicting winds and rushed off at an angle.

Away she plunged into the densest gloom, and Tim soon became aware that he was no longer in the ravine, but traversing a great cavern, through the air of which he saw silent discharges of lightning zig-zagging in blinding streaks.

He finally discovered a rugged wall, by the aid of the search-light, and spent an hour following it around in a desperate search for some opening by means of which to escape to the open air.

At the expiration of that time the boat ran into the strong current he encountered before.

The next moment she was caught in a shaft of air that poured in through the roof and swept away at right angles.

It carried the Sky Rocket along with the speed of a locomotive, and Tim had all he could do to steady the schooner by the wheel.

A brief interval of rapid transit followed, when the schooner was suddenly shot out of an immense opening in the side of the mountain, and hurled far out into the air.

Tim stopped the driving wheels.

He then manipulated the search-light by means of a lever in the pilot-house, and sweeping its rays about saw that he was out of the mountain and hovering over a great valley.

A terrific rain storm was in progress.

The wind was moaning over the rocky mountain crags, and rustling among the trees, while the clouds were driven by thunder and lightning with excessive violence.

Far below him the old sailor suddenly caught sight of the glow of a large fire, and discerning the figures of a great many men and the outlines of tents, he resolved to find out what it meant.

Burning with curiosity, Tim lowered the schooner to the ground in an open glade among the trees, beside the dried-up bed of a stream in which he saw the encampment nestling, and alighting he quietly crept toward the tents.

By the lights of their fires Tim saw that there were hundreds of Moormen with their wives and children there.

So varied were the castes and costumes, that every nation of the East seemed represented there, for these people had come from the Kattegat festival at the Yalle river.

It was the season for their yearly offerings to the Kattagam god.

As Tim came to a pause beside a tent made of talipot leaves, he heard two men within it conversing in English, and to his surprise recognized the tones of one as belonging to Banda Medima.

It was evident that when the Veddah escaped the authorities at Wrightstown, he had made his way back to Ceylon.

"Fortunate you met me at Kandy," said Medima's companion, "for I fought a duel with one of my fellow officers in the barracks, wounded him and had to fly. You are sure there's a treasure in the crater?"

"You will see to-morrow," replied Medima. "I've enlisted all these people to aid me to attack the crater dwellers and secure the gems, and to-morrow morning we make the first assault. I hope Howell has not reached the place ahead of me with Jack Wright's party."

Tim opened his eyes in surprise.

Here was a surprise.

At this juncture one of the Moormen saw the old sailor, and his cries of alarm brought Medima and a soldier from the tent.

As soon as the Veddah saw Jack he realized that the old sailor had overheard their talk, and springing toward him, he shouted:

"There's one of Wright's men now. Capture him, or he will expose our plans, Rodgers, and they will cause us a good deal of trouble."

Seeing both men coming for him, Tim made for the schooner, and getting aboard, he ran into the pilot-house.

No sooner had he started the Sky Rocket heavenward, however, when the two men who followed him dropped a grapnel fastened to the drag-rope overboard, and sprang into the turret.

Tim reached for a weapon, but ere he could grasp it the two men attacked him, and knocking him down, bound him hand and foot.

While Rodgers guarded him with a revolver the Veddah scoured the schooner, which was rapidly rising and joyfully announced that there was not another one aboard.

The drag-rope grapnel failed to catch anything and hold the schooner down as Medima intended.

"Their vessel is in our power," he exclaimed, triumphantly, "and we can now prevent them from getting into the crater, use this air-ship for our own purposes, and I can avenge myself upon them for causing my arrest. Now you, Topstay, explain how we are to work this boat! If you refuse, my friend here will blow your brains out! Tell us how to descend to earth again, first of all!"

CHAPTER XV.

A STRANGE RESCUE.

Jack, the balloonist and the Dutch boy remained with blanched faces awaiting their fate, for it was evident that unless help came the voracious white ants would devour them alive.

Such a horrible, lingering death in prospect filled them with despair, and it became manifest to Jack that the barbarians must have had the most malignant hatred for Donald Howell to impel them to consign their prisoners to such an appalling doom.

The ants worked themselves through the prisoner's clothes, and tickled and tortured them until it seemed as if they would go mad in their utter helplessness to get rid of them.

With fiendish persistence the ants crept into their ears,

noses and hair, and might have entered their eyes and mouths had they not shut them.

In a short space of time their bodies were running with blood beneath their clothes, the poison from the bites caused them to swell, and their faces were soon a mass of sores.

Groan after groan of intense misery pealed from their lips, and they writhed and struggled but were unable to get free.

It was terrible to feel those thousands of insects creeping all over them and not be able to brush them away, and Jack cried:

"This torment is more than I can bear!"

"Oh, why didn't dey kill us?" piteously cried Fritz.

"God forgive me—you are suffering on my account!" groaned Howell.

"It isn't your fault. Don't blame yourself. You didn't compel us to come."

"Don't dere vhas no vay to got oudt ouf dis?"

"None," solemnly replied Howell.

"We might have known it, seeing the bones of our predecessors lying about here in the sand," bitterly said Jack.

"Mebbe dot Dim vill come?" eagerly suggested Fritz.

"I'm afraid not," gloomily said the balloonist.

A vivid glare of lightning split the sky, its glare flashing down through an opening in the roof overhead.

It gave them a momentary view of each other, and cries of pity for one another pealed from their lips.

Some rain drops pattered down upon them.

A short silence succeeded the clap of thunder that roared above the horror of their situation, increasing as the ants continued their agonizing work, and more of them got upon their bodies.

Their case seemed to be utterly helpless to Jack, and he was upon the point of giving up all hope of ever escaping alive, when suddenly a lot of gravel came rattling down upon them.

It came from the hole above.

The next moment a flaming torch came flying down, and falling on the floor, it blazed away there startling them.

They ventured to open their eyes and look up, when they caught a glimpse of a long, thick vine let down through the opening and the figure of a man sliding down.

But the ants caused them to close their eyes again instantly.

"Deliverance!" cried the boy.

His words thrilled his two companions.

The next instant they felt the stranger cut their bonds, and they brushed the swarming ants from their hands and faces and glanced around, but the torch had gone out, so they saw nothing.

Up the vine they climbed to the opening and they got out on a plateau on the mountain side.

Another brilliant flash of lightning darted across the sky, and peering down in the cavern they saw the headless man standing there, his body swarming with ants.

"Strange—strange!" gasped Jack. "It was he who saved us."

"He has done us a good turn," muttered Howell.

They got rid of the rest of the ants on their bodies now, and picking up a smoldering torch of resinous wood, Jack lit it again.

The headless individual must have been using it before

The trio presented a most wretched appearance as they stood there in the darkness and rain upon the small plateau upon which the top of the cavern opened.

Jack flashed his light down into their former prison, but saw no sign of the man who had gone down to liberate them.

The grinning skulls and bleached bones lying in the sand among the millions of white ants lent the place a frightful aspect.

Recoiling with a shudder, the boy joined Fritz and Howell.

"The fellow has disappeared!" said he.

"Und dot veller didn'd vhas wait till ve efen say tank you alretty," said Fritz.

"Let us get away from this place," suggested the balloonist, "for as long as I remain in sight of that accursed place I feel as if I might have to undergo its miseries again!"

"We will have to climb down those rocks," said Jack, "and they are very slippery from the rain. The descent from here is over two hundred feet to the level below, and a fall means sure death!"

"I'd go down if id vhas two hundred inches!" said Fritz.

Every one felt sore and wretched.

But they began the descent, stepping from rock to rock, jumping down on ledges, letting themselves down steep walls by clinging with hands and feet to the interstices, and working with no light save that which they were enabled to get from their sputtering torch.

The position they were in when they emerged from the cavern of ants was several hundred feet from the extreme top of the crater, and they calculated that the air-schooner must be a few hundred feet below where they were, on the inside of the crater.

It was a dangerous climb down that almost perpendicular height in such gloom, and their hands and feet continually slipping, but they were desperate and did not hesitate.

Two-thirds of the distance had been successfully covered when a cry from Jack warned the others that there was danger.

It soon became apparent.

Their escape had been discovered.

A number of the crater people stood upon the ledge they had just left, and were sending the loose rocks crashing down after them, for the light of their torch plainly indicated their location.

With the thunder of guns the jagged rocks came crashing down about the three, so close that they came within an inch of being hit.

"Extinguish your light!" cried Jack.

"Den ve can't see," remonstrated Fritz, pathetically, for he held the torch now.

"It means the probability of a fall to destruction below!" exclaimed Howell.

"Can't help it. As long as they see our lights they can make a target of us."

"Shiminey, dot is so!" said Fritz, dropping the torch.

"Here's a ledge with a shelving rock overhead," said Howell.

"Then," said Jack, "pause here awhile."

Crouching under the protruding rock, they waited in breathless suspense.

Down came rock after rock, but striking on the bulge over their heads, the stones bounded off and fell down the yawning black gulf below, without doing them any harm.

For a quarter of an hour this bombardment continued, without doing any of the trio any harm, and then it ceased.

Not daring to venture out yet, Jack remained where he was for a quarter of an hour more, none of them uttering a whisper.

It was fortunate they acted in this manner, for they soon heard the subdued sounds of voices a short distance away, and heard the crater dwellers come clambering down after them.

"Look out!" softly whispered Jack. "They are pursuing us. They have pink eyes and can very likely see in the dark like owls."

"Lie down flat," whispered the balloonist.

It was fortunate they did so, as the people in question could not see in a bright light, owing to the peculiarity of their eyes.

They heard numerous forms go clambering down the rocks in close proximity to where they crouched, and the sound of their voices, gradually receding, was soon lost in the distance below them.

Half an hour slipped by ere the fugitives dared to venture out of their concealment to finish their descent to the broad wooded plateau below the shelf they were on.

It was not until then they realized how fatigued they were, for the trials they underwent had worn them out in body and mind, and the wounds covering their bodies made them ache all over.

Just as they reached the edge of the ledge to go down, a cry pealed from Howell, who was in advance, and he recoiled.

"See there!" he exclaimed, pointing downward.

There was a great mass of lights swiftly ascending from the ground toward them, and Jack gave only one look and cried:

"By heavens, it's the Sky Rocket!"

"How she vhas got herselluf oudt ouf dot crater?" growled Fritz.

Ignorant of the tragedy that was transpiring on board the air-schooner, the three began to yell at Tim to pick them up, when they saw that no heed was paid to their cries.

But as the schooner arose above them the lightning showed Jack the drag-rope and grapnel hanging down.

It swept by them and the boy involuntarily grasped it.

The next moment it swept along, carrying the boy with it, and as the schooner mounted higher and higher it lifted the boy with it, grasping the rope and his feet on the grapnel.

Swaying like the pendulum of a clock on the rope, Jack began to climb up toward the schooner.

Left on the ledge, Howell and Fritz yelled to him to bring the Sky Rocket back to their rescue.

CHAPTER XVI.

A BAD MAN'S FATE.

Instead of the air-schooner going over the top of the crater, Jack was surprised to see it mount higher and higher into the air.

For a moment he was perplexed by it, but it presently occurred to him that Tim was sending her up for the purpose of rising above the storm which was then raging.

The boy continued to climb up the rope with the agility of a trained athlete, the gale swaying his body to and fro dizzily.

It would ordinarily have been no trouble for him to have accomplished this feat, but after the hardships he had just been through it taxed all his strength to climb up the rope to the railing of the schooner.

He arrived there finally, panting and wearied by his exertions, and grasped the rail to pull himself upon the deck, when Medina, who was crossing the deck at that moment, saw him.

With a cat-like spring he reached the railing in front of the exhausted boy, upon whose face the electric lights were shining.

"Jack Wright!" he hissed, vehemently, glaring in the boy's face.

"Banda Medina!" gasped Jack, overwhelmed with astonishment at seeing the Veddah there.

"Where did you come from?"

"I just climbed up the drag-rope. And you?"

"I? Why, I am in possession of this boat."

"Heavens! There has been foul play here!"

As Jack said this he made a desperate effort to get upon

the deck, when the Veddah, with a diabolical scowl upon his face, pushed the boy's feet from the schooner, and hissed:

"Back! Back with you to destruction!"

"Stop!" shouted the startled boy. "Would you murder me?"

"Ay! I'll kill you! This is my vengeance!" yelled Medima.

"Rascal!"

"Let go that rail!"

"I won't!"

"Then I'll mash your fingers to pulp!" screamed Medima, in frenzied tones, as he pulled a revolver from his pocket and raised the butt to bring it down on Jack's fingers.

The boy was so tired and his arms so strained he could not hold on much longer, and certainly would fall from the boat down into the gloomy gulf below unless he got on deck.

Observing the malignant look of the Veddah's black eyes, and realizing what peril he was in, Jack drew a deep breath, and forgetting his exhaustion for a moment in the excitement of the danger he found facing him, he swung up both legs under the railing and struck Medima with his heels.

The shock knocked the Veddah's feet from under him ere he could bring down the pistol butt, and uttering a yell, he was knocked sprawling to the deck.

Now was Jack's opportunity, for the man had dropped his pistol.

He dragged himself in from the edge of the deck, and rolling over and over until he reached the Veddah's weapon, he eagerly grasped it, and aiming it at the man, he shouted:

"It's my turn now, you villain!"

"Oh!" screamed the man, scrambling to his feet. "I'm lost!"

Bang! went the pistol, as these words left his lips.

The schooner gave a lurch, spoiling Jack's aim, and the ball flew wide of its mark.

Fearing for his life, although Jack had no intention of killing him, the Veddah rushed away across the deck.

In his panic his foot struck a stanchion.

Down he went with a crash, and tumbling under the railing, he fell from the Sky Rocket down to the earth.

A wild, despairing cry pealed from his lips as he went over, and even Jack uttered a sickened cry as he saw what a terrible fate had overtaken the scoundrel.

The boy lost sight of the man's body as it went shooting down through the gloom, and a shudder shook his form.

"Unfortunate wretch!" Jack muttered, pityingly. "He has met his doom. I'm sorry for him, yet ought not to be when I think of how desperately he just tried to kill me."

He turned away and to his surprise saw Rodgers coming out of the turret to find out the cause of the row.

"Ah! Here's an accomplice of his, I suppose!" the boy muttered, as he raised his pistol.

"Hulloat!" said Rodgers. "Who are you? Where's Medima? What's the trouble out here?"

"One question at a time!" said Jack. "In the first place, I am Jack Wright. Next, the Veddah just fell overboard and must have reached the earth by this time, and the trouble was merely a fight he and I just had."

"By Jove!" gasped Rodgers in astonishment.

"In conclusion," proceeded Jack, leveling his weapon to bear on the military individual's head, "I am the captain of this schooner, and I demand your unconditional surrender. Failure to comply means sure death—do you understand?"

"I leave!" exclaimed Rodgers in alarm.

"Hold up your hands."

"There—does that suit?"

"Now march into the turret."

Rodgers marched, with Jack after him, and there the boy saw Tim lying on the floor, bound hand and foot and gagged.

The boy then realized what happened.

Pointing at a closet door, he said sternly to Rodgers:

"Open that closet and enter."

The man did so, and Jack closed the door and locked him in.

He then sprang to the lever board and stopped the schooner's ascent.

This done he at once released Tim, and found out from him what had happened since they parted in the crater.

He then explained how he got there, and how Medima was killed, and recited the history of his own adventures.

It was at once decided to return for Fritz and Howell, whom he had left on the mountain ledge, and the Sky Rocket was lowered earthward again and the search-light started.

A hunt for the two deserted ones followed.

In a short time they were guided to the ledge by the cries of the two, and flashing the search-light upon them saw that they were in a dangerous situation.

The crater dwellers, who had pursued them down the rocks, were guided to their location by their shouts, and while the Sky Rocket was rushing through the air to their rescue the savages were climbing up the rocks from the plateau below, with the evident intention of attacking them.

The foremost of them had almost arrived at the top of the ledge, when Jack armed himself with a rifle and opened fire upon them, driving them back again.

Before they could rally, the schooner reached the ledge, and Fritz and Howell got aboard and learned what happened.

With yells of rage and cries of disappointment the crater dwellers fired volley after volley of missiles at the Sky Rocket without doing her any harm as she arose in the air again.

There was a party of several hundred of them gathered upon the plateau below, and when Howell saw them, he said:

"I see a chance to win their esteem, Wright."

"How do you mean?" queried the boy.

"By telling them about the attack the Moormen, whom Medima enlisted, are going to make on them to-morrow."

"Do so, then," quickly replied the boy, "and it will put them on their guard. When the Moormen attack them the crater dwellers will be prepared, and while they are fighting on the outside of the mountain their attention will be diverted from us. We can then go into the crater and secure the booty, which will be thwarting the Moormen out of by apprising the crater dwellers of their coming."

With this plan in view, Jack lowered the schooner to within speaking distance of their enemies, and Howell then went out on deck, and addressing them in their own language, which he spoke fluently, he told them of the danger that was menacing them from the Moormen.

He advised them to send a spy to their encampment to verify his story, and urged them to defend the crater from the invasion of the Moormen, who were encamped near the river.

The crater dwellers listened attentively to him, and Jack saw by the search-light that they sent a spy away.

It was not deemed advisable to return to the crater until the two tribes were hotly engaged, so Jack drove the Sky Rocket away and brought her to a pause several leagues away from the mountain.

Leaving Tim on duty, the boy, Howell and Fritz doctored their injuries and turned in for the night for a much-needed rest.

On the following morning they arose early, feeling refreshed and rapidly recovering from their wounds.

A good breakfast was partaken of, and Jack then had Rodgers brought out of the closet. He was fed; they manacled him, and when he was chained the young inventor approached him and said:

"See here, Rodgers, I want to ask you a few questions. You must realize that we look upon you as our enemy.

Now, you have not done us any great harm yet, and if you act fairly we will liberate you. Will you try to win your freedom or not?"

"Of course I will," replied the man. "What do you want?"

CHAPTER XVII.

A HUNT ON THE PLAINS.

Jack pondered a moment, and then turning to Rodgers, he said:

"I want to know when the Moormen are going to attack the crater dwellers."

"Late this afternoon," replied the military man.

"Ah! Now where did you first fall in with Medima?"

"In the capital—Kandy. I was an officer in the army there, and to escape punishment for fighting a duel I fled. It was then I met the Veddah. He had just arrived from America, and told me his story, induced me to accompany him, and we met with the Moormen, and enlisted their services to beat the crater dwellers, so we could get some of the jewels to be mined there."

"If I were to release you now, you would very likely join your Moormen, and, as you are an experienced soldier, you might general them into a victory. Consequently I am going to hold you till the engagement is over. If you behave yourself I will then give you your liberty. Confine him below, Fritz."

"Thank you," replied the man, nodding, as he was led away.

They now had plenty of time on their hands, and, glancing down at the plain below, Jack saw a herd of buffalo grazing.

"As we have absolutely nothing to do, and I want to get the stiffness out of my legs, suppose we descend and have a shot at yonder game, boys?" suggested the boy.

This plan was eagerly assented to, and the Sky Rocket descended in the middle of a small clearing, whereupon Fritz was left in charge of her, and Jack, Tim and Howell armed themselves and alighted, and pushed their way through the rattan jungle.

This jungle stuff was woven in a mass of hooked thorns, long tendrils armed in the same manner, although no thicker than a whip-cord, winding themselves around the parent canes.

With some difficulty they forced their way through this disagreeable thicket, and when they got out on the plain they found themselves quite close to the herd of buffaloes.

The beasts were about the size of large oxen, of immense bone and strength, very active, the hide almost devoid of hair, giving a most repulsive look to their India rubber like skin.

Some of them were wallowing in a mud bed, but as soon as the three hunters appeared they started up, and gazed at them with astonishment; and when Jack approached them they ranged up in a compact body, from which several vicious-looking bulls stepped forth.

Jack ran toward them, but when he arrived within twenty paces the main body of the herd suddenly wheeled around and thundered across the plain in full retreat, leaving six bulls behind who seemed disposed to fight.

Two of them instantly charged on Jack, but he rapidly fired first to the right, then to the left, implanting a ball in the shoulder of each.

This was the fatal spot, for they both fell.

Another one now charged furiously on the boy, and the rest attacked Tim and Howell, and Jack prepared to fire when the beast paused.

It then wheeled around and went off at a canter, the boy following and trying to get a shoulder shot at it.

The buffalo would gain a hundred yards, face the boy, throw up his nose, turn his head, grunt, advance a few paces, then retreat as the boy advanced.

By this means he led Jack a run of half a mile from his friends, and then wheeled around, snuffing and pawing at the ground, and charged.

Jack fired, but missed his aim, and sprang aside, as he was close to the animal and in danger of getting gored.

The bull swept by him, but the boy tripped and fell, dropping his rifle.

Before he could regain his feet, to get his gun, the buffalo had turned and rushed for him again.

It had a singularly ugly look, and was evidently worked up to a high pitch of fury, the boy observed.

There was a tree near by, and as Jack saw that he had no time to regain his rifle, he scrambled to his feet and ran for the tree as fast as his legs could carry him, the buffalo in hot pursuit, not two yards behind him.

There was a vast difference of feeling in hunting and being hunted, and as Jack cast a quick glance back over his shoulder and saw the flying buffalo so close to him, his face grew very white.

A blow from the beast's horns, coming along at such a frightful pace, would be equal to getting hit by a locomotive, for these brutes can gallop through mire as fast as a horse can travel over clear ground.

It seemed a mile to the tree, but it was only ten yards distant, and the boy observed in the quick glance he cast that he would not have time to reach and climb it to get out of the furious bull's way.

But a clever expedient flashed in his mind, and he ran as straight as an arrow for the tree trunk.

Upon reaching it, the buffalo was only a foot behind him, and grasping the trunk with one hand, he swung around it.

There sounded a heavy thud, as he expected, and the beast struck the tree trunk a terrific blow with its head.

It paused, rebounded, fell and rolled over, considerably stunned.

Before it could recover, Jack ran around the tree with his hunting knife in his hand, and dashing up to his fallen foe, he plunged the keen blade back of its horns into its brain.

The beast was killed instantly.

Jack then picked up his rifle, and glancing back at Tim and Howell, he saw that they had disposed of the rest of the herd.

It was impossible to remain there long enough to go after any more of the buffaloes, for there were numberless ticks swarming in the grass that were biting and irritating Jack and his companions badly.

The obnoxious insects were no larger than a grain of powder, but were worse pests than the most ravenous mosquitoes in wet weather.

Besides these vermin, the hunters were tormented by leeches that filled the grass, attacking them with voracious ferocity, causing them to ache all over, as their bites drew blood, the heat from the blazing sun was intolerable, and the scratches from cactus, briars and jungle thorns were almost maddening.

The boy hastened back to the air-schooner, to which Tim and the balloonist were driven by the pestering insects, and getting aboard, he bade Fritz raise the Sky Rocket, while he and the rest were refreshing themselves with a bath and a lotion for the bite wounds.

Within a few minutes they got into the upper currents of air, and drifting slowly toward the mountains, they went out on deck and sat under the awnings Fritz had spread, and watched the scene below.

A few wandering Veddahs were seen going about in quest

of game, with six-foot bows and arrows their only weapons; they are the most skillful marksmen with them in the world.

In crossing a stream in which floated the carcasses of several dead buffaloes, they saw a small village on the embankment, from the houses of which all the inhabitants had rushed to the river's edge, led by the Moodeliar (headman), and all were excitedly shouting to a man who was swimming across the water.

The cause of their alarm became manifest when our friends observed a huge crocodile swim out toward the man and seize him.

The Moorman had been setting nets for lolas—a ravenous fish of ten pounds weight, between a trout and carp, which are usually caught by a wading person with a cone-shaped basket, open at top and bottom, which is plunged to the shallow bottom over the fish.

A moment after the saurian seized the unfortunate wretch, he was dragged beneath the water and never came up alive.

They left the horrible scene behind them and drifted along several miles further, when the cry of "alia!" (elephant) reached their ears, and they saw several natives flying through a dense jungle.

Belly-deep in a muddy pool stood the biggest beast Jack had ever seen, and he soon waded ashore, the water dripping from his body, and with quick, springy steps he majestically strode up to a barkless rubbing tree, and moved back and forth against it.

He then tore up several bunches of grass, but without eating them, he flung them pettishly aside, kicked up some turf and dirt and then advanced after the flying natives, who had joined some companions.

He soon scented them and came to a pause, his whole demeanor changing.

He cocked his enormous ears, lifted his trunk high in the air and raised his tail as stiff as a poker, while his eyes gleamed like balls of fire.

The natives now began to stalk him, armed with noosed, tough and fibrous ropes, and crept up close, when he suddenly fled.

As fleetly as deer the blacks gave pursuit, and reaching his hind legs they dropped a noosed rope over each one and pulled it tight.

They let him run on, dragging the ropes after him, till he neared a huge tree and then, picking up the dragging ropes, they took several turns around the massive tree trunk with them and made them fast.

The elephant fell on his knees but could get no further, although he strove hard to escape captivity, and failing to do so he tore the lower branches of the tree off with his trunk as easily as if they were cobwebs.

Presently the natives lassoed his trunk and tied it to his forefoot, then lines were secured from his back legs to the front ones, giving them about two feet play, and having tied his neck to his other front leg, the tree lines were cast loose.

The mighty king of the jungle was rendered as helpless as a kitten, and the triumphant natives drove him to their settlement to train him as a howdah bearer and sell him to some Indian Rajah.

Viewing this proceeding with absorbing interest, Jack turned to Tim and remarked with a sigh:

"By Jove! that's an unusual sight to witness."

"Ay, now, but they've foundered him," replied Tim, nodding.

"Younger elephants are usually sought for," interposed the balloonist, "as they are much the easiest to train."

By this time the afternoon was far advanced, and they drew near the mountain in which the strange people dwelt, to whom the balloonist had spoken the night before.

It was time for the battle to begin between them, and the

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE BLAST.

There was a strong breeze blowing from the southeast, against which the Sky Rocket was forging toward the mountain, and, as they drew nearer to the lofty peak, the wind bore the sound of fire-arms and the shouts of men to Jack's ears.

Within a short time they arrived close enough to the precipitous side of the mountain to see that the Moormen had made an attack upon the crater dwellers.

Forewarned of what to expect, the latter were swarming all over the ledges, the archers and spearsmen firing volley after volley down at the Moormen, who were climbing up the rugged hillside in an effort to get a footing on the plateau above.

Detachments of the crater dwellers were stationed at points of the best advantage, and were sending showers of rocks down upon their enemies every time they made an advantage.

The Moormen, on the other hand, were armed with modern weapons, and despite the advantage of position held by the crater dwellers, their adversaries maintained a stubborn fight by the use of their rifles and pistols.

"They're hot at it now, lad!" exclaimed Tim.

"Ay, and this is our most favorable time to enter the crater, then."

"Vot I vhas do—go over der dop?" asked Fritz, in anxious tones.

"Not here," replied the boy. "They would see us and divine at once what our intention is. Make a circuit of the mountain."

The fat boy nodded, turned the wheel, and with humming helices the schooner turned and went off at an angle with her course.

Leaving the combating savages hotly engaged with their fight, they swept around the mountain and passed up over the crater.

Not a soul was to be seen down below.

Jack located a large quartz bed near the stream, in which he had seen evidences of large numbers of the precious stones lying buried, and directed Fritz to land her there.

"We will have to work quick," said the boy, as the Sky Rocket alighted. "In three or four hours darkness will fall, and in the interval the crater dwellers might return and interrupt us. Had we more time I would stick to the stream."

"Ain't you going to work it again?" asked Howell.

"No. I'm going to blast up the quartz bed."

"Wot's ther matter wi' usin' ther picks an' crowbars?" suggested Tim. "If we goes ter work a-blastin' ther noise is sure ter bring in ther crater dwellers ter find out wot's a-goin' on, an' then we'll come tergether an' thar'll be a scrimmage."

"I tink so neider," acquiesced Fritz.

"Ay, now, it pays ter be keerful," continued Tim. "I once got a lesson that way which I don't mind a-tellin' yer about. It happened aboard o' ther old frigate Wabash."

"What was that?" queried Howell, not observing the disgusted looks on the faces of Jack and Fritz.

"It happened this way," began Tim, glaring gloatingly at his victim. "We wuz a-sailin' toward ther enemy one dark night ter board her. Ther lights wuz put out and every one cautioned ter keep still. On we went, an' we got in gunshot o' ther enemy, when a squall came up an', strikin' our foretops'l, it busted like a gun——"

"Then your enemy took fright and got away, I suppose?" asked Howell.

"Ay," replied Tim. "But she ran afoul o' a sunken reef

an' wuz wrecked. We ran up to her and took all her crew prisoners, an' afore nightfall ther wessel pounded to pieces on the rocks and sunk."

"But I thought this happened at night time?" said Howell, in perplexity.

"I didn't say so, did I? It wuz broad daylight, sir, an——"

"You first said it was a dark night. How else could all these things happen if it wasn't at night, and a very dark night, too?"

Tim looked mortified, scratched his head, recalled the details of his story to mind, and seeing that he was caught, he said no more, but stumped away and left Howell to ponder intently over the story.

Telling the old liar to get some torpedoes, Jack procured a powerful diamond-edged rock drill, and making a connection between it and the battery, left the schooner with Tim.

Getting the drill in operation, the boy perforated the ground with innumerable holes, in which the torpedoes were planted.

Connecting wires were then made fast to binding-posts in the explosives, and a wire was run to them from the battery.

An effort was made with the hand implements to break the ground, but they proved to be useless, as the earth was formed of a quartz densely charged with iron ores, which nothing but the torpedoes were capable of tearing up.

Two hours were consumed in making these preparations, and when everything was in readiness to explode the mine, the boy was just about to follow Tim up on the schooner, when he was startled by hearing an unearthly yell, and glancing around he saw the figure of the headless man come flying out of one of the holes honeycombing the face of the cliff.

The singular object only remained exposed to view a few seconds, for he rushed into another of the openings and vanished again.

"Heavens! That strange object again!" cried Jack.

"Lord save us! can't we find out wot it is?" queried Tim.

"I'll try to solve the mystery, if you'll go with me."

"Come on, then, lad! Man or devil, I'll find out which!"

"Don't go into those holes! The natives may be there!" cried Howell, excitedly. "Come back, Wright! There's no use bothering with that object! Come back, I say——"

"No! I'm going to get a shot at it if I can!" said the boy.

"No, no!" shouted Howell, springing to the ground in a frenzy. "Don't fire at it! Promise me that, Wright, will you?"

"How strangely you talk! You are pale and excited. What interest can you possibly have in that headless man that you are so much concerned about the matter?"

Howell shrank back with a confused look beneath the stern, inquiring expression of the boy, and muttered some unintelligible reply in low, hoarse tones.

Jack was very much struck by the man's demeanor, for Howell was evidently tormented by the most burning anxiety, and acted altogether like a man half mad with alarm.

"Answer me!" said the boy, impatiently.

"I have nothing to say," replied the man, recovering his calmness by a strong effort of will. "It is true the headless object is a matter of mystery, but its actions are so human that it would be rank murder to kill him, endowed as he is with human faculties."

There was logic in this reply.

Still it did not deter the boy from his resolve to solve the mystery of how the singular object could go around without a visible head.

"I will not kill him," said the boy, "but I am determined to find out who and what he is, if it costs my life to do it."

And so saying he ran off with Tim.

They were both well armed and determined to succeed.

Upon reaching the opening in the cliff, into which the headless fellow had disappeared, they ran in.

A rough passage led them into a small cavern filled with peculiar looking stone shafts, standing upright, in the hollowed sides of which stood numberless mummies of the crater dwellers.

There was a long, narrow split in the roof, which let in a faint streak of daylight, but it sufficed to show the boy and the sailor the outlines of the headless man, who was flitting about the shafts in the most erratic manner.

Jack made a dash for him and he vanished.

When the boy reached the spot where he had gone, he peered around, wondering where he had disappeared, when his glance fell upon an opening in the wall in back of the shaft.

"He has given me the slip!" exclaimed the boy, in disgust.

"Blast his timbers! whar has he tacked now?" growled Tim.

"Into this opening. Follow me, and I'll pursue him."

"Heave ahead, but look out, my lad!"

Into the opening rushed the boy, and he found after he had traversed it a short distance that it opened into the crater.

When he reached the exit, he saw the flying figure of the fugitive a long distance ahead, rushing squarely toward the schooner.

After him ran the boy at full speed, when he saw Fritz and Howell on the ground, trying to head off the strange fellow.

He had no recourse now but to plunge into the stream or go over the boat, and seemed to choose the latter course, for he flew up the accommodation ladder like a monkey, ran over the deck, dashed into the deck-house and disappeared.

"Look out, Wright, here comes some of the natives!" cried Howell just then.

The boy glanced back and saw a score of the crater dwellers come flying out of the holes in the wall, and they shot a volley of arrows at the boy and sailor, showing their hostile intentions.

Jack and Tim reached the schooner far ahead of them, however, and got on board with Howell and Fritz in safety.

The boy hastened into the pilot-house.

"I'll teach them a lesson!" he panted. "Tim, lock the headless fellow in!"

The old sailor nodded, and hopping to the deck-house door, he locked it.

By this time the hostile crater dwellers had reached the spot where the blast was planted, and were tripping and trampling over the copper wires.

With a grim look, Jack grasped the lever and turned it around.

A current of electricity flashed into the wires, and exploded the buried cartridges with a thunderous report, and a vast cloud of dirt, stone and iron ore shot up in the air, in which was mingled the remains of all the savages who were anywhere near the mine.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE MYSTERY EXPOSED.

Those of the savages who escaped destruction from the explosion retreated into their cavern again, and when the dirt settled Jack saw that the gem-laden ground had been so broken that many jewels were exposed.

(Continued on page 28.)

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(Continued from page 26.)

"We have no time now to attend to the headless object," said Jack; "he is safely stowed away below. Before those crater dwellers return with reinforcements we have got to secure all the gems we can get our hands upon and clear out of here."

"Den come aheth—I vhas retty," said Fritz.

"Ay, but we ain't pertected enough," exclaimed Tim. "Thar's them 'ere suits o' mail wot we kin put on, an' if them pirates comes back an' fires at us while we're a-workin' we'll be safe."

He brought out three suits looking like the armor of ancient knights, and they donned the metal clothing and sallied out.

To collect the uprooted precious stones was now an easy matter, and they flung them up on the deck to Howell.

The shadows of twilight began to settle down.

In half an hour they had taken out nearly all the gems that were exposed to view, when a shower of arrows and spears shot out of the holes in the cliffs toward them.

Without exposing themselves, the crater dwellers remained in their covert and kept up an incessant fusillade.

Protected by their metallic suits, however, the three workers were not injured by any of the missiles.

"The beggars are becoming cautious!" observed Jack. "They are learning to fear us now and won't show themselves."

"Judgin' by ther number o' weapings as they're a-heavin' at us," said Tim, "I reckon as there's considerable o' them in ther caves."

"Didn'd yer vhas noticed dot ve don't heard some more ouf dot fighdin' on der oudtsite alretty?" queried Fritz.

"Then they must have ended the battle by driving away the Moormen," said Jack, reflectively.

This theory must have been correct, for had the Moormen won the battle they would very likely have invaded the crater.

The weapons aimed at them were very annoying, although they could not penetrate the metallic suits of the trio, and in a fit of exasperation the young inventor paused in his work, and, turning to his companions, he said:

"I've got several bombs with me, and I'm going to stop their firing by giving them a volley. Have you got any?"

"A few," replied Tim, with a nod.

"Und me, too," added Fritz.

"Then fire them at those holes where the arrows are flying out thickest. I thought the wretches would have gratitude enough left in them to leave us unmolested after we had done them the favor to warn them against the expected invasion of the Moormen, but I see they haven't."

"I don't tink dot ve vhas ter plame," growled Fritz. "Dey vhas mad mit dot Howell, und ve got ter catch id for him vonct. Id must be someding very bad dot he done to make dem so pitter against him like dis."

Jack and Tim agreed with this surmise.

But indulging in no more speculation, the three ranged themselves in a row, and, producing their hand grenades, they began to fling them toward the spot the shots came from.

They had the desired effect, for, bursting with loud reports, they tore and rent the rocks, and aroused a chorus of the wildest cries within the crater caverns, plainly showing that at least some of the savages had not escaped injury.

For a time after that they heard no sound.

Even the firing ceased, and our friends began to prosecute their search for the precious stones in peace again.

The fall of darkness presently interrupted their work, for it was much darker within the crater than about the outside world.

"We can do no more here now," said Jack. "Let us return to the schooner. By this time we must have enough of those gems collected to make each one of us independently rich."

The others were satisfied, and they started to return when they heard Howell shouting to them in frantic tones:

"Wright! Wright! Come back!"

"He's in trouble!" muttered the boy in alarm.

"Hurry! Hurry!" screamed the balloonist.

"Come on, boys!" exclaimed the young inventor.

He dashed away, followed by Tim and Fritz, and when they reached the schooner, they saw the aeronaut struggling on the deck in the hands of the headless man, who had burst open the door of the deck-house and attacked him like fury.

Up to the deck hastened the boy, when the balloonist hurled the singular creature aside and he fell to the deck.

His shirt was torn to shreds in the struggle.

A cry of amazement pealed from Jack's lips, and pointing at the motionless body, he exclaimed:

"See there! He isn't headless after all!"

And the boy told the truth, for the stranger had simply been wearing a garment without a neckhole in it.

Upon a closer examination they saw that he had a remarkably short neck, and a flat, broad head, which aided the deception so, that with the garment on, there was not much protuberance where his head should have come through.

This delusion was enhanced in the past, because they had never seen the man at close range in a good light long enough to observe how the deception was effected.

Howell strode over to him, but the moment his glances fell upon the young man, he recoiled, uttering a piercing cry.

For a moment he reeled as if about to fall, overcome by a strong emotion; but, recovering himself, he gasped:

"Great Heaven! he is my son!"

"What!" cried Jack, in amazement; "your son?"

"Yes," admitted the aeronaut, groaning.

"But he has the face of a savage."

"His mother was the queen of this tribe of crater dwellers," Jack and his friends were very much startled by the man's words, and exchanged significant glances.

Then the boy said:

"Why don't you clear up this mystery, Howell?"

"I may as well," replied the man, as he observed that the prostrate fellow was stunned and senseless. "I always wanted to conceal the facts from you, as I knew of the existence of this poor idiotic object in this place."

"Then he is crazy?"

"Born so."

"Unfortunate wretch!"

"To proceed. I'll be brief. I was once captured by the crater dwellers and held in captivity. Their queen was a cruel woman with a most fiendish temper. She fell in love with me, and I had either to wed her or lose my life. I chose the former repulsive alternative, and was kept in the tribe, jealously watched, several years. This boy was the result of our marriage. Every effort I made to escape these people was baffled. One stormy night I quarreled with the queen, and she made an effort to stab me to death. In self-defense I killed her. Then I fled, and escaping my pursuers, I finally reached civilization."

"These people hate you for killing their queen?"

"Exactly so," admitted Howell.

"When you first offered to come here with us," said Jack, "you admitted that you had a personal motive in view."

"I remember saying so. It was a natural feeling every parent has for a child. I wanted to see what had become of this poor object. Until now I never knew that the headless mystery was my boy, but still, suspecting some trickery in the matter, knowing he was insane and having a natural feeling for him, when you threatened to shoot him on sight

my sympathy for him was aroused. That is why I implored you not to fire at him, Wright."

Everything was clear enough now.

"He is stunned," said Jack, after a pause. "I'll try to revive him."

Fritz and Tim went below to prepare supper, and Jack and the balloonist passed into the turret to procure the means of reviving the inanimate man.

They had scarcely gone when the insane creature, who had already recovered and cunningly maintained the appearance of unconsciousness, opened his eyes and glanced after them.

He then arose, and, swiftly stealing overboard, he crept away in the bushes and disappeared.

When Jack and Howell returned they missed him.

"Gone!" exclaimed the boy. "He was fooling us."

"Gone!" echoed Howell, with a start. "Well, I'm glad of it."

"He will very likely return to the tribe in the caves."

"It is just as well," said the balloonist, with a sigh. "I never could do anything with the poor fellow in civilization."

At that moment Jack happened to glance over toward the central crater mound, upon which the search-light was streaming, and there he saw the insane man standing on top of the hill, screaming and waving his arms.

"There he is now!" exclaimed the boy, pointing at him.

The balloonist was about to reply, when a most startling event occurred.

CHAPTER XX.

THE BURGLAR.

There sounded a fearful rumbling roar, as if a thousand batteries of artillery had suddenly been discharged.

It was accompanied by a report like thunder and the ground suddenly heaved and shook.

A cloud of dust was blown from the mouth of the crater, to a height of thousands of feet, and a moment later a column of smoke and fire burst from the mound and shot straight up into the air.

So violent was the first shock that the cliffs were split in scores of places, and enormous rocks and showers of stone and dirt fell down into the crater at one side, while on the other the highest cliff suddenly began to rock, and incline inward as if about to fall.

"An earthquake!" gasped Jack, in dismay.

"The volcano is bursting into eruption!" screamed Howell.

Tim and Fritz came rushing up from below and they heard Rodgers, down the after companionway, uttering the wildest cries of alarm.

A moment after the first shock was felt, and the lurid glare of the volcano burst out, the boy saw the insane fellow on the brink of the crater disappear in the explosion, and knew that he must have been destroyed.

From the holes in the cliffs there swarmed scores of the crater dwellers, uttering loud lamentations.

They stood revealed for a few moments in the awful light, and then retreated out of sight again so fast that there could be no doubt they would leave the mountain.

"Holy Chee!" groaned Fritz, in terrified tones. "Vot busted?"

"If we don't get out o' here soon, we'll git roasted!" exclaimed Tim.

The young inventor darted into the pilot-house.

He was choking and blinded by the gases that came from the volcano.

An unbearable heat was pouring from the column of fire as myriads of blazing cinders were blown into the air.

Every tree and shrub was set afire, and the heat that was radiated became so intense that our friends could hardly breathe.

The boy turned the starting lever and the helices spun, when up from the ground rose the Sky Rocket.

"To remain five minutes longer is sure death!" gasped Jack.

Just then the sails caught afire on the masts.

A cry of consternation pealed from Tim's lips.

"If ther masts catches, ther big helices'll go!" he roared.

"Den helb me got dose sails down!" screamed Fritz, wildly.

They each manned a mast and the air-schooner, continuing to ascend, looked like a blazing meteor going up into the darkening sky.

Faster and faster whirled the wheels, until they screamed above the roaring of the fast intensifying volcano, and the groaning and creaking of the mountain.

The sailor and the Dutch boy grasped the halyards, and unfastening them from the belaying-pins, they pulled on the haul-downs, and the blasing canvas descended.

Down came the foresail in a fiery blanket, and Fritz just had time to skip aside to escape being covered by it.

He set to work cutting away the lashings, and as soon as it was free, he pulled down the visor of the metallic helmet, as he yet wore the suit of armor, and dragging the flaming canvas to the rail, he hove it overboard.

Down it fluttered through the air in a mass of flame, and the fat boy hastened aft to Tim's assistance.

The mainsail haul-down had snarled and held the canvas up, upon observing which the old sailor went up the shrouds on the port side as nimbly as if he did not have a wooden leg.

He was armed with a hatchet, but found he could not reach the masthead, as the heat from the burning sail below was more than he could bear.

"Come down here!" shouted Howell. "You'll roast up there!"

"Dash me if I kin reach the halyards!" groaned Tim, in despair, as he descended. "Now wot's ter be did?"

Fritz soon settled the difficulty, however, by hoisting the sail till the kink in the rope was straightened, and then letting the burning canvas run down again.

This time the rope ran clear through the block, and when the three got the canvas on deck they hove it over.

Some of the ropes up aloft were afire now, but a few buckets of water extinguished them.

Had they not acted so promptly, the two mast helices would certainly have been destroyed, when serious results might have ensued that might have ended in their death.

By this time the air-schooner had arrived within a short distance of the top of the cliffs, when she suddenly fell into the mysterious influence which once before had pulled her into the interior of the mountain.

Jack detected the fact at once that she was being forcibly dragged toward the opening in the high cliff.

Quick to act on the spur of the moment, he turned the schooner aside ere she became too firmly caught, and sent her swiftly off in another direction.

"What's the matter now?" asked Howell, entering the turret.

"Didn't you feel the boat being dragged to the cliff?"

"No. But now I see the spot, I can tell you that your promptness has probably saved our lives."

"How do you mean?" anxiously asked the boy.

"Well, I had almost forgotten that this dreadful trap existed. Many a crater dweller, while climbing those rocks, lost his life by being dragged into that aperture."

"What is the cause of it?"

"The inside of the cliff is hollow. At the top there's a hole, and on the outside of the mountain another aperture.

The wind sweeps into the opening furiously at the top and out of the other exit. This forms an enormous suction about the opening on this side, which pulls everything into the opening that gets in its reach."

Further conversation was now interrupted by an awful roaring sound, and as Jack glanced down, he saw that the crater was beginning to vomit a stream of red-hot lava.

The apex of the mountain was splitting in every direction, and when the schooner got over the top of the crater, Jack started the driving-wheels full force.

Like an arrow from the bow dashed the Sky Rocket ahead through the air, leaving the mountain behind her.

A wonderful spectacle met the view of her crew in back.

The crater had rapidly begun to fill with the smoking lava, and filling rapidly it overflowed.

Streams of livid fire were pouring down the side of the mountain from the crevices rent by the earthquake, and the verdure catching afire wherever it ran, in a short time the entire mountain was a mass of roaring flames!

In a few minutes the air-schooner was several miles away from the mountain, several thousand feet above the ground.

The moon and stars shone out in the sky, and below them lay a deep jungle of lemon grass.

Lowering the air-ship to within fifty feet of the ground, Jack and his companions soon got over their excitement and partook of a good supper. Fritz had prepared for them.

It was decided that they remain where they were until the following morning, and they brought up the precious stones they gathered and spent the evening separating them from the quartz.

They were then placed in a large leather valise, and it was locked and left standing in the wire deck-house.

Tim and Fritz then turned in, leaving Jack and the balloonist in the turret, planning their disposal of the gems.

Along toward midnight Rodgers came creeping up the stairs of the companionway, freed from his bonds.

"They don't mean to liberate me," he muttered, "and a better chance to escape I'll never have again. I'll venture it, anyway."

He crept over the taffrail, and peering down, saw what a short distance it was to the ground beneath the boat.

There were a number of loose ropes hanging around on the belaying-pins, and selecting one, he tied one end to the railing, and dropping the other end down, saw that it nearly reached the ground.

When satisfied with this, the man skulked up forward and stealing into the wire deck-house, he grasped the valise in which he had seen Jack put the jewels, and crept out with it.

"I'll get what Medima brought me here for, anyway!" he chuckled softly to himself; "and no trouble about it, either!"

When he reached the rope, he caught hold of it, and twisting it around his leg and arm, while he clutched the valise in his disengaged hand, he began to slide down toward the ground.

Unconscious of the theft, Jack and the balloonist in the turret kept on planning out their future movements, and the escaping prisoner got down to within a few feet of the end of the rope, when out of a port-hole Fritz suddenly poked his head.

In descending Rodgers had brushed against the Dutch boy's window, and the noise aroused him and directed his attention to the man's escape.

"Stop, thief! Stop, thief!" he yelled, at the top of his voice.

CHAPTER XXI.

FOUND BY ACCIDENT.

The yells of Fritz alarmed Jack, and rushing from the turret he heard the voice of the Dutch boy roaring:

"Halt! If yer vhas mofe vun inches further I fire!"

"Mercy!" yelled Rodgers, as he saw a revolver pointed at him.

He came to a pause, afraid to go down any further, for fear the fat boy would keep his threat.

"Come up dot rope!" shouted Fritz.

"I won't!" sullenly replied the fugitive, desperate over fear of capture.

"Do yer vant me ter trop yer alretty?"

"You can fire, but I would not return anyway."

"Den took der consekvences!" growled Fritz.

He pulled the trigger, and as the weapon was not loaded, it failed to go off, and Rodgers at once surmised the reason.

A look of relief crossed his face, and he yelled defiantly:

"I'm off!"

But before he could slide down to the end of the rope and drop to the ground, he found the air-schooner shooting heavenward, and the space between himself and the ground rapidly widening.

Jack had taken in the situation, returned to the pilot-house and increasing the speed of the helices, raised the schooner.

A cry of terror escaped the man.

"Baffled!" he gasped, in utter dismay.

He measured the distance to the ground, with a view of letting go his hold and dropping, but shudderingly glanced away again, as he saw that he might kill himself in the attempt.

Indeed, he felt his hands slipping, and to save himself from falling he let go the valise and seized the rope with both hands.

Down went the treasure to the ground, and falling among the tall jungle grass, it disappeared from view.

When Jack raised the boat to a height of five hundred feet he stopped her, went out on deck and went aft.

"Rodgers!" he shouted, brandishing a knife, "if you don't come up the rope, I'm going to cut it and let you fall."

"Don't kill me!" yelled the man, in horror. "I'll come up."

"I thought that would fetch him!" chuckled Jack.

The man immediately ascended to the deck.

A startled look crossed Jack's face when he saw that he did not have the bag.

"What have you done with the valise?" he demanded.

"Dropped it. I had to, to save my life," said the man, sullenly.

"By Jove! that's nice! How are we going to find it in that sea of tall grass, I'd like to know?"

"I give it up!" admitted Rodgers, coolly.

"Tie this fellow up again!" said Jack. "I'll lower the schooner to the ground, and see if we can find the valise, Howell."

While the balloonist was making a prisoner of the man, Tim and Fritz came up on deck again, and the boy lowered the schooner down to the plain.

They searched all over for the bag, but as there was not enough light, they finally desisted, to continue in the morning.

It seemed as if daylight would never come, and in the long interval, when Tim and Fritz were on duty, they saw that the eruption of the volcano subsided.

Indeed, before daybreak it was over, and although the appearance of the peak was slightly changed, one would hardly have thought it was so frightfully convulsed to look at it.

The sun arose in the cloudless sky, and when a hasty breakfast was partaken, the four aeronauts left the Sky Rocket, and began their search again for the lost bag.

They scattered, and each one taking a different direction, they scoured the grass with the tenacity of blood-hounds.

The loss of the bag in that long grass was almost as bad as losing a needle in a hay-stack.

Jack was disgusted with his ill-fortune, and started toward distant woods, when he was surprised by seeing two huge bears going on through the tall jungle grass ahead of him.

The bears of Ceylon are very numerous, are possessed of enormous muscular power and are very savage, as they assail men without the slightest provocation whenever the chance occurs.

Waddling through the jungle, these two monsters presented a most formidable appearance, and hearing the boy coming on behind them, they slackened speed to a careless, swaggering walk, and finally paused.

They eyed him critically as he drew a pistol he carried from his belt, and firing a shot at the nearest one, the ball exploded, tore out a piece of its neck, and the noise frightened the pair.

They retreated with a lumbering gait, and Jack followed them.

When he arrived within a dozen paces of the hindmost brute, he raised his pistol to fire again, when the bear ran around in a circle facing him, and uttered a savage growl.

Only one moment it remained glaring at him, and then it charged on the young inventor with a most sinister look.

Jack aimed between its eyes, and when it came within three yards of him, he pulled the trigger and the brute dropped in its tracks.

Off started the boy in pursuit of the other beast, and following within a yard of its tail, he waited for a chance to get a shot at its shoulder, when, with a fierce, deep roar, it suddenly sprang around and leaped for the boy.

Jack fired, knocked him over in a cloud of dust and crackling grass, and it quickly arose to its feet and rushed for him again.

He waited for the beast to get in short range, keeping the weapon aimed with deadly precision, and then fired.

Unfortunately, however, there were no more bullets in the pistol, and no harm was done to the beast, nor had he another weapon.

An exclamation of dismay pealed from his lips, and he recoiled; but the bear was now so close to him that he could not escape it.

It lurched itself forward, arose on its haunches, and aimed a blow at him with its paw, and struck him on the neck.

His skin was badly lacerated, and he was knocked down, two yards away, thousands of imaginary stars flashing before his eyes.

His body struck something soft and yielding.

Casting a quick glance at it, he saw that it was the missing valise, but the next moment the bear came flying towards him.

He got upon his knees and hurled the useless pistol in its face, drawing a snarl of rage from its gaping mouth and bringing it to a pause.

Upon his feet bounded the boy, bleeding from his wounds, and seizing the valise, he started towards the boat at a run.

"Help! Help!" he shouted.

The next moment the tangled grass tripped him, and down he went again in a heap, the snorting of the bear pursuing him ringing in his ears, at a distance of only a few yards away.

A dark shadow fell upon him, and glancing up, he saw the Sky Rocket coming along, within ten feet of the ground, with Tim at the wheel, and Fritz in the bow, holding a rifle.

"Save me!" shouted Jack.

The bear reached him.

But his friends saw it, and just as the ferocious beast was on the point of attacking the boy, Fritz fired at it.

Only one shot was necessary.

The bear was killed. It was fortunate his friends had returned to the boat.

"Saved!" gasped Jack, arising to his feet.

"Hulloa, dere!" cried Fritz. "Didn'd I vhas killed him alretty?"

"Dead as a door nail!" replied the boy, gladly.

"Den dot's all right. Come onpoard vonct."

"I've found the valise."

"Hurrah!" roared Tim. "Bully fer you, lad!"

The air-schooner alighted near the boy, and Jack went on board, and Howell joined them.

"If it wasn't for the bear I wouldn't have found the bag," said Jack, when he explained what happened.

While Tim was attending to the boy's wounds, Fritz alighted, and securing the choicest parts of the bear's meat, he stored it away for further use on the table.

The stones in the bag were found to be intact, and a short time afterwards the Sky Rocket was started away westward.

In the afternoon she had arrived within sight of the coast, and it was decided that they start for home, after they indulged in some of the sport at hunting the game they saw below them.

There was an encampment a short distance off at which Jack saw some British soldiers, who were evidently there for the gaming, and they headed the air-schooner for it and descended among the campers.

To Jack's surprise, he found that the soldiers were on leave from the very barracks Rodgers came from, and after explaining all about himself, the boy put his prisoner in their hands, as Rodgers had treated him so mean.

One of the officers explained then that they were going to have a deer coursing, as some natives had been sent out to beat the bush for them, and offered to give the adventurers the use of a pair of hounds.

To this Jack gladly assented, and half an hour later he and Fritz were armed and ready for the chase, as Tim and Howell had no desire to join in the sport.

A fine elk was presently driven into view by the native beaters on the patina, or plain, and the boy loosened the hounds.

Away the fleet-footed beasts dashed in pursuit of the deer with loud, hoarse cries, and away dashed the elk into cover with the speed of the wind.

"Fritz!" shouted the boy. "Here's our game! On with you! Tell Tim to follow us in the Sky Rocket. Come ahead—quick!"

And away dashed the eager boy after the baying hounds at full speed.

CHAPTER XXII.

A DEER COURSING—CONCLUSION.

Fritz left Tim in charge of the air-schooner, and ran after Jack, who had followed after the hounds to the top of a hill.

The tracks of the elk were fresh upon the ground, and the scent was evidently strong, as the two dogs dashed off upon it followed by the boy.

It led them to a valley with a river running through the center, and upon nearing the water-course, which was lined by dense nillho underwood, they heard the baying of the hounds ahead.

It was much like a cornfield and hard to penetrate.

But the boys went crashing into it and saw the buck at bay in the river, while the hounds were barking at him upon the embankment.

As soon as the two boys appeared the elk, who was standing belly deep in the water, charged on the dogs with its antlers, as the hounds now plunged into the stream.

Jack and Fritz rushed to the water's edge just as the elk

went proudly swimming up the stream with the hounds in pursuit.

Fritz raised his rifle and took deadly aim at the buck, but ere he could fire Jack struck the weapon aside.

"Stop!" he exclaimed.

"Vhy?" growled Fritz, in surprise.

"That's not fair."

"Ach, don't yer vant ter kill him?"

"Yes—with the knife—when the hounds exhaust him."

"But don't it vhas easier ter shood him dis vay?"

"Of course. But it's cowardly to shoot a swimming deer."

Fritz looked perplexed.

He could not understand royal sport.

It was like a pugilist striking his opponent when he was down, but sport to most foreigners amounts to mere butchery.

Fritz lowered his rifle reluctantly.

By this time the hounds had drawn up the buck, the big beast gained a footing in shallow water, and turned proudly and fearlessly upon his tormentors.

He was a picture as he stood there with distended nostrils, bristling mane and flashing eyes.

The dogs now attacked him from the shore side, and he reared up to his full height, plunged forward and struck the nearest hound such a terrific blow with his antlers that it was badly wounded.

With admirable courage the hound reappeared behind the buck's shoulder, and with one leap he was hanging on its ear.

Endeavoring to shake it off, the buck waded against the current a few feet and plunged the dog in, almost drowning it.

In a moment more the other hound leaped upon him, and despite his rearing up, his swinging to and fro and his plunging, he could not shake off the persistent beasts.

They struggled fiercely in the water and upon the embankment, the brave buck fighting gallantly for its life.

It was of no use, though.

The dog would have torn the noble beast to pieces had Jack not put an end to the fight by killing the animal with his hunting knife.

"That was a most magnificent bay!" exclaimed Jack, admiringly.

"Ach," was Fritz's practical reply, "it wouldn't haf dook half dot much time if yer vhas let me put a bullet in him before."

"Very likely," assented Jack. "But there would be no sport in that."

"Looger dem torks—dey vhas runnin' away alretty."

"They probably mean to return to their master at the encampment."

"No, dey don't—dey vent in by der chunkle vonct."

"Hark! What is that noise they've stirred up?"

"Id sound like a pick."

"A what?"

"A schvine."

"Oh—a pig—a boar?"

"I tink so."

"Well, you get some of the elk's meat, and I'll run over there and find out what the trouble is."

Fritz nodded, and Jack hastened off, just as the Sky Rocket came up.

Upon reaching the dense underwood Jack heard a fierce grunting, and saw the hounds worrying a huge bear.

A rifle-ball put an end to the beast, and taking their game and the dogs on board of the air-schooner, she was headed back for the encampment, at which they presently arrived.

Here the hounds were returned to their kennels, and when night fell the sportsmen all returned with their game.

Our friends spent a jolly evening with them, and when they all finally turned in for the night they were glad to get their rest.

Next day Jack and his friends were up early, and after a hearty breakfast they took leave of the soldiers, and putting the machinery in motion, the Sky Rocket ascended the heavens to a height of a thousand feet.

She was then started ahead, and finally reached the ocean, homeward bound, and all her crew glad to start.

Crossing the Arabian Sea to the African continent, she sped along northward to the blue waters of the Mediterranean.

Then shaping her course to the west, she finally passed out over the turbid waters of the Atlantic.

No incident occurred to mar the pleasure of their trip, and the wounds of our friends healed up, their spirits revived, and they thoroughly enjoyed their wonderful aerial flight.

In due course of time the shores of America appeared in sight, and the Sky Rocket was steered for Wrightstown.

Howell never again referred to his unfortunate son, and readily agreed to Jack's plan to sell the jewels in a lump and equally divide the proceeds among the four.

It was late in the afternoon of a very fine day when the peaceful village of Wrightstown appeared in view and the residents of the place sighted the Sky Rocket.

She was greeted with cheers as she hovered over the town, and finally settled down in the open-roofed shop of the young inventor, from whence she started her voyage.

Then our friends left her.

They were met with an ovation by the residents of the town, and in a speech Jack made from his piazza, he gave the people a brief synopsis of his voyage.

On the following day the jewels were sold, and a large sum was realized, which was divided equally.

Howell then parted with Jack and his friends, and returned to New York, where he usually dwelt.

Whiskers and Bismarck were restored to their quarters in the house, Tim and Fritz resumed their usual mode of living, and Jack returned to his general occupations.

The boy was delighted with his trip in every way, and although he dissected the Sky Rocket and packed it away in the loft of his workshop, he hoped some day to make use of the wonderful schooner again.

For the present, however, his mind was thronged with fresher ideas, and, as a new kind of singular device had occurred to him, he set to work to build it and experiment.

What the nature of this marvel was, and what wonderful uses he put it to, we must reserve for another book, for this story is concluded.

THE END.

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